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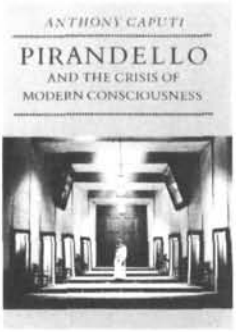

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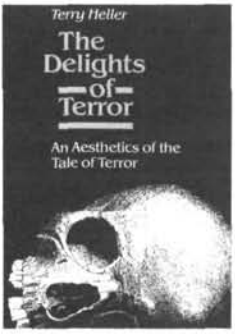

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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

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Round for One Voice

Poems by Dan Jaffe

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Letter to the Editors

Dear Editors,

I'm writing to express my dismay at your letting Dana Gioia's essay on "the new formalism" slip by with the howler that Williams' poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" is really blank verse. Here's how the two lines Gioia derives from the poem actually scan:

> só múch dĕpénds ŭpón ă réd whéel bárrŏw
> glázed wĭth ráin wátĕr bĕsíde the whíte chíckĕns.

Only Mr. Gioia's urge to prove his mistaken point could have fooled him into calling this blank verse. These are not pentameter lines. They are not even predominantly iambic. They are simply *not metrical*, and trotting out Shakespeare's feminine endings will not make them so.

Mr. Gioia's handling of this issue is revealing, because his failure to understand—or even seriously engage—Williams' prosody is so common among defenders of "the new formalism." On every side, we see these people straining to establish their aesthetic nostalgias by misreading, quoting bad non-metrical verse as representative of the whole poetic approach, and pointing to the lack of a mass audience for poetry as evidence of the damage wrought by free verse. These claims are simply bogus. The fact is that the majority of "new formalist" poetry is just as bad as the majority of free verse poetry. This shouldn't surprise anyone: the bulk of all poetry written in every age is bad.

What we need to understand, because I don't believe anyone understands it yet, is why good non-metrical verse is good. This is a thornier question, but worth shedding a little blood over. It's also a political question, though not of the narrow sort Mr. Gioia so correctly dismisses. I mean that the failure to engage modern prosody *on its own terms* is part of the broader retreat from the inner life which has swept so many Americans, artists, and intellectuals and citizens alike, into the peculiar enervation of "the Reagan 80's." The root feeling that nothing really *matters* is what leads poets to spin out pantoums and triolets and Pushkinesque stanzas on life and love in Silicon Valley; others it leads into the kind of formless "free verse" ramble quoted by Mr. Gioia. This enervation is what we need to face. But facing it will require more intellectual vigor than Mr. Gioia displays in his essay.

Of course, no poet should be expected to choose one way of writing over another. And readers who routinely forgo the Seamus

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Heaneys in favor of the Louis Simpsons, or vice versa, are impoverishing their spirits. But when aesthetic nostalgia results in the lionization of a pseudo-poet like Vikram Seth, something is wrong. The lights may be on, but nobody's home.

Lakewood, Colorado JOSEPH HUTCHISON

Dana Gioia replies:

Mr. Hutchinson seems to have read one paragraph of my "Notes on the New Formalism" with great care and then skimmed the rest in irate haste. In the process he has not only misread my central arguments but also seemingly confused them with several reactionary articles on formal poetry recently published elsewhere. Consequently, I won't disagree with some of his assertions. I made the same points—though less shrilly—in my essay.

Some readers—among them Mr. Hutchinson—looked at the title of "Notes on the New Formalism" and assumed it was a manifesto asserting the aesthetic superiority of rhyme and meter. Anyone who read the actual essay with attention would have found a much more questioning and quizzical approach (as I had hoped the tentative label of "Notes" would have signalled). While I am sympathetic to formal poetry, I levelled my only harsh criticism at the rhythmically incompetent verse being written according to the formalist vogue. Since Mr. Hutchinson assumed *a priori* that as a so-called "New Formalist" I would never criticize other New Formalists, he missed the basic point of my argument.

I won't bore readers with a complete list of Mr. Hutchinson's other confusions. But let me give three brief examples. Nowhere in my essay did I quote "bad non-metrical verse as representative of the whole poetic approach" of free verse. The only free verse I quoted was from the Psalms and William Carlos Williams. The shoddy work I did quote was *formal* poetry—or what I called "pseudo-formal" verse. Likewise it seems bizarre to be accused of "the lionization of a pseudo-poet like Vikram Seth" when I mentioned Mr. Seth only once in passing in deliberately neutral terms. And how odd to be guilty of "failure to understand—or even seriously engage—Williams' prosody" after spending four pages laying out an argument for the visual nature of Williams' versification. I'm sure someone said all these awful things to Mr. Hutchinson, but it wasn't me.

Finally there is the more interesting question of my dual scansion of Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow"—once as a pentameter couplet and (in the subsequent paragraphs which Mr. Hutchinson inexplicably ignores) once as free verse. I did not, as Mr. Hutchinson assumes, point out the metrical echoes in this poem to discredit Wil-

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liams, but as the context made clear to illustrate the difference between aural and visual prosody. I also ended my discussion demonstrating how Williams' visual placement of his words created a new more interesting rhythm than the awkwardly metrical one. (Why are Williams' devotees such rigid fundamentalists? One hint of unorthodoxy and they cry "heresy." Surely Williams deserves better than such narrow literalism.)

I came upon my alternate scansion of "The Red Wheelbarrow" empirically. For years I had noticed that people remembered this poem exactly word for word although they could never accurately quote any other lines by Williams. Then hearing someone recite the poem one evening, I observed he divided the eight free verse lines of written text into two equal surprisingly iambic phrases. No matter what Williams had written his poem was being registered (and memorized) aurally as blank verse.

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Letter from Orissa

DEAR H,

March in India signifies a time for beginnings, a time when the *koel's* haunting cry reverberates through the clear skies, and the trees, full of new leaf, tremble as mysterious sobs enter their throats from the depths of the earth. At this time too, the old year according to the Indian calendar comes to an end. Joyous festivals mark the new year, as side by side with sweeping celebrations, feverish transactions continue in commercial houses and government offices for the closure of another "financial" year.

Now the cricketing season is over too, and the papers and magazines are still discussing the recent defeats of the Indian team by Pakistan both here at home and in the Middle East. Analyses by sports commentators fill the back pages, pictures of cricket "stars" stare out from the glossies in the bookstands, even their faces are used for publicity purposes by the government-controlled TV. In quiet contrast to all this, and against the mad killings which go on almost every day in the northwestern state of Punjab, a peaceful little festival was being held in the central region of the country—a festival of subdued poetry readings and deliberations that brought out into the open the Indian poet's responsibility to the society he lives in, and where poets from all over India meditated on justice, love and humanity.

The occasion was *Kavibhārati*, the first ever Triennale of Indian poetry. Here, from the 28th to 30th March, in near-idyllic surroundings, as the cool evening breezes of March floated in across the large tranquil lake and the lights jewelled the minarets on the far shores, something else came into life besides the sound of the modest wash of waters against the rocks. It was a quiet statement for the restoration of our faith in the creative arts. For three days sensitive poetic activity perhaps made us think of those things we had wanted sometime to say; three days in which the magic of the mind fluttered like a pennant in the pain-soaked sky of Bhopal. And one felt the sadness still, as one heard the words of fifty poets who had gathered for the occasion, and the sadness seemed to settle over the gleaming new complex of the Centre for the Arts at Bharat Bhavan.

So *Kavibhārati* began, and ended, without much publicity. We heard and waited, we stood back and we saw, in the words of the Urdu poet Shamsur Rahman Faruqi: "Night buys us for peanuts. / Night falls with a broken wing."

What *did* eventually emerge, I ask myself, from the many sessions of readings and the seminars on the role of poetry? Nothing really

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perhaps, and yet, at the end a simmering dissatisfaction at the way literatures in the various languages of the country were taking us. The vastness of the subcontinent, with its varied regions, the differences in the peoples with their separate languages, often belie the suggestion made in almost all circles that the many literary movements cohere in a single Indian vision. Even a very generalized study of the writings in the twenty regional languages reveals the fallacy of this opinion.

To my mind, two things became evident from these deliberations. First, that the significant writers who write in the many languages in India were mostly English-educated academics—or in other words, writers who had Master's degrees in English and American literature and who were involved actively in the teaching of English in the country. And perhaps these poets and novelists have been able to use their resources of Western literature, especially English and American, in their own individual creations. Secondly, the question of language still quickens our blood whenever we talk about literature; with the never-resolved problem of whether English or Hindi should be the common ground where our twenty literatures can meet. At Bhopal, which is a Hindi-speaking state of the Indian Union, translations of poems were read out either in Hindi or in English, along with the originals. And it would admittedly be hard to arrive at a consensus in this matter. If poets all over the country were to read one another, and if readers were to share ideas and feelings originally expressed in Assamese or in Tamil, a national journal would be absolutely necessary—but in which language would the translations be? This question of Hindi or English remains still a delicate and emotional matter, and is yet to be resolved to our mutual satisfaction. We cannot deny that there is a strong antipathy to English in the north of India, and somehow this seems to be linked with those in power: the two main political parties—the Congress, which is the power behind the Centre, and the opposition Bharatiya Jan Sangh—both opt for the use of Hindi. This fact is strongly resented by the advocates of English in the South and the East.

For reasons of space I should like to restrict the scene of this letter primarily to poetry in India. With a strong oral tradition, from as long ago as one can remember, sages to wandering mendicants have sung episodes from the ancient epics, particularly the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, in their own versions, and this singing has been endowed with religious significance. These two epics are legends of war, circumscribed in colorful ritual. The *Mahābhārata* remains the longest single poem among the literatures of the world, containing more than 90,000 stanzas; it was composed by the sage Vyāsa. Therefore one of the common denominators of Indian literature as a whole has been Hindu mythology, in which ideas and content from these epics and from the *Upanishads* have been assimi-

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lated, to be used by writers right up to the present. And along with this mythological dimension which is a powerful feeding ground for regional literatures, is the contribution of a folklore which is throbbingly alive in rural life. This folklore has apparently two main sources: myths and legends (the primary one), and the celebratory festive song. And strangely the Siva-Parvati, Radha-Krishna and Rama-Sita themes persist to hold their place even in a fast-changing social situation in the country.

When one studies the literary scene in India, one is confronted with its complexities. And yet, if we consider Indian literature as one, with a single literary sensibility, we could go on to classify it into three broad periods, based on chronology. The first period could cover everything up to the middle of the nineteenth century, when the English language arrived; the second would extend to approximately the middle of the twentieth century; and the last would encompass post-independence writing from 1947. Sanskrit, our oldest language, was the medium of the *Vedas* and other epics. Related to most European languages, it was the root language from which our regional languages took form. Gradually however, Sanskrit lost its hold on the masses, as did the cohesiveness of Hinduism, which petered out in mere ritual. Indian aesthetics disappeared, and Sanskrit died, restricted as it was to a supposedly intelligent but closed minority.

It was probably the British occupation of India which slowly but surely led to a new unity among the different regions and also gave new blood to an almost stagnant literary scene. English brought with it new ideas and forms and became a major source of literary power. Indian writing during this period, i.e., from the mid-nineteenth century till the mid-twentieth, exhibits a sort of coherence that had been absent for many years. And English began to serve as a creative medium for many Indians, especially for those who lived in cities or were exposed to the British experience.

But it was actually with the departure of the British from India that a new seriousness in the intentions of poets and novelists writing in English became evident. One would have thought that the English language would soon be obliterated from the subcontinent, because of the antagonism towards all things British; but this did not happen. And simultaneously, there was more writing being done in the regional languages, and the unpretentious voice of the poet began to be heard. Not only was there an introspection, a revision of values in this new writing, but a new sincerity—with writers rallying around the year 1947, a milestone politically and in the literary domain.

Strangely though, no work of great magnitude or vision appears in any of the regional languages in continuation of the literary tradition we Indians seem to be so proud of. Somehow the Hindu view of life which had infused such vigor and subtlety into earlier writing

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began to wane. Only a set of formal patterns remained in use, which the regional literatures appeared to take up and elaborate. It was only in the post-independence period that writing around the country picked up the momentum and zest that had been lacking so far. Could this casual indifference to serious literary pursuits be taken as the result of the colonization the Indian people were subjected to, or did the defeats they suffered time after time leave them mere victims of an impotent nostalgia?

I suppose it would not be wrong to suggest that poetry in the regional languages began changing only after the *new poem*, with its emotional but strongly intellectual content, found its way into the country. Modernism, where abstraction and concreteness could be successfully interlinked, swayed the heads of these English-educated writers—their gods were Eliot and Yeats. On the west coast of India, writing in Marathi, Vinda Karandikar spoke of "The Traitor":

> He gulps down his daily ration of liquid fire
> Served by the morning papers,
> And then to expiate the sin
> Fingers the love-locks of children;
> Reads the *Gita* and warns himself
> "Don't you touch a weapon. Beware!"
> Opens his umbrella to remember
> Only the nuclear mushroom,
> Places his hand on somebody's shoulder
> Just to regain his balance.

From Kerala, on the southwestern tip of the peninsula, the voice belonged to K. Satchidanandan, who grouched in his native Malayalam:

> But he who has been out in the world
> Finds no peace at home.
> I am a tombstone now, spiritless, dead.

But it was only in the late sixties that poets in the country began to be interested in the changes that were taking place around them. They had to become one with the anguish they saw and felt, they could no longer be passive onlookers. The imagistic patterns changed, and in their place was seen a bolder, freer flow of word and line. It was then that a poetry calling itself *digambara*, or naked, began to appear in the southeastern areas of India. Six poets writing in Telugu spoke with an uncompromising honesty never seen before. The six changed their real names and wrote under more meaningful poetic ones such as Jwalamukhi, Nikhileswar and Nagnamuni. The *digambara* movement certainly was a breakthrough in form and content. It is interesting to note that the first volume was

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released by an unknown rickshaw-puller on the wide pavement of Abids at Hyderabad—at midnight. Bhairavayya cried out in Telugu:

> These are eternally incensed truths
> Like the agony of a woman at child-birth
> Like Jean Valjean's hunger and misery
> Like a widow's tragic stupor
> When her son is swallowed by Fate's enormity.

At the same time, a *dalit* (literally, downtrodden) poetry appeared both in Maharashtra and Karnataka. The distinguished Kannada poet, Gopala Krishna Adiga, asked in his poem "The Earth Is Not Flat":

> All the waters of pool, river
> Well or gutter become one.
> Tell me where do you find castes?
> Isn't it when you are rooted in the soil?

More than two decades ago, when Ronald Segal went on to discuss and reinterpret attitudes toward India in his book, *The Anguish of India,* readers seemed doubtful about what they read; for no longer did India stand forth as a beacon of truth. Instead, the same dark forces of superstition and irrationality appeared to obstruct the attainment of an ordered society. Segal put forward his concern competently when he asked: "Will India have an Indian government ruthless enough to rule in the interests of the still silent masses?" Today, as we near the end of the eighties, the same anguish and indignation that plagued Segal's social conscience eat into the heart of every sensitive individual concerned with finding a solution for the country's persistent ills. The strong government which Segal hoped for has not come into existence even forty years after India gained her independence. It is indeed tragic that we have not been able to produce such a government, one which would help to control all significant aspects of human life. The indifference to human suffering is evident everywhere, even today, and it becomes difficult to close one's eyes to this continuing trait of the Indian upper classes—this "final denial of humanity" which Segal exposed so honestly in his book.

Caste, color consciousness and a fanatical puritanism are aspects of our living that drag us down to the depths of our being even in 1987. If we consider further the dimensions of hunger and sexuality which still plague our lives, it is easy to understand why, despite honorable exceptions, so much contemporary writing in India appears old-fashioned and unexciting. It would not be wrong to state that most Indian poetry and fiction continue to be inhibited by an

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inexplicable romanticism. Is this, I wonder, mainly because of the Indian sensibility, because of an intrinsic desire to put together and experience the Primal Unity, because of a persistent feeling of sanctity and sacredness that mark *karuna* and *ahimsa*? Generally speaking, the Indian mind still takes refuge in the cloudy symbols of fatalism; the average reader or listener is unlikely to be swayed by bare, brutal poetry.

As I come to the end of this letter I realize how incomplete and haphazard it has been. India is too vast a country, too fragmented in some ways, for one region to know much about another. Very little material is available in translation. The past few years have witnessed the publication of some books in English translation, but this work too is disoriented.

As a writer who uses English, I have often been asked: "Why do you write in English in India?" This simple question opens up large areas of debate. Perhaps we'll leave that for another time. But it would only be right to mention that in India more books are published in English than in any other language.

And here is a question I'd like answered. Is there any other country in the world whose President or Prime Minister releases a book every other day, throughout the year?

Yours faithfully,
JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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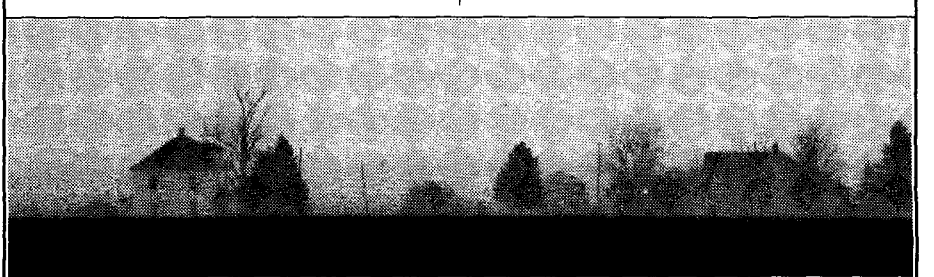

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JAMES McCONKEY

Contextual Surprises

On a June day in 1956, my wife, Jean, and I entrusted our children to a neighbor and left our home in eastern Kentucky to look for another in the Finger Lakes region of New York; after six years of teaching at a small college in the hills of the Cumberland National Forest, I had been appointed an assistant professor at Cornell. We stopped in Cleveland to visit a friend—a colleague of mine during my first teaching job—who was convalescing at a mental hospital; Kent had suffered a breakdown following the unexpected death of the woman he had expected to marry. When a nurse unlocked the door to admit us to his ward, two patients playing table tennis in the hallway raised their paddles to menace us or to defend themselves; obviously we were interlopers in the bastion of their emotional security.

Kent, who had been expecting us, stood before his door in an outsized hospital robe, smiling. He gave Jean a kiss and me a warm handshake before ushering us into the room and introducing us to his roommate, Gordon, a frail and balding man in his early thirties whose initial shyness toward us quickly turned to curiosity and signs of friendship.

Gordon sat at the very edge of his mattress like a fragile and eager-eyed bird, listening to us talk, interrupting our conversation now and then to offer us cookies from a plastic package. The gentle irony that always characterized Kent was so evident it seemed to me he was merely acting the role of mental patient; he told us, for example, that the crucial aspect of his therapy lay less in psychiatry and antidepressant drugs than in the baseball game he was daily forced to endure, an activity so boring that he was recovering his sanity as quickly as possible to escape it. Patients hid in closets or under beds whenever the orderly cheerfully called out that it was time for fun and wholesome sports outdoors. To show us how he covered center field while the orderly, who pitched

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for both teams, struck out all the opposing batters no matter how slowly he lobbed the ball (drugs and personal distress having cost them their coordination), Kent put on his baseball cap and sat on the floor with his eyes closed and his arms hugging his knees.

Gordon giggled. He patted the blanket on each side of his body, coaxing Jean and me to sit beside him. "I'm a baker, I work for Wonder Bread," he said, as soon as we joined him; and he grasped my hand with one of his and Jean's with the other. "I live in the same house I was born in, with my mother."

"Your mother is dead, Gordon," Kent said mildly, and to Jean and me he explained that he and Gordon had been made roommates because they both had lost people they loved, and were supposed to help each other meet that truth. What Gordon was to remind him, in case he forgot, was that he, Kent, had discovered the body of Margaret on her kitchen floor—that she had died of an embolism while preparing the dinner for which he had brought the wine. Kent said those words so bravely that my eyes became damp.

"It was my father who died," Gordon said, and then glanced apprehensively at Kent. "I mean, it was my father who died *first*. . . . It was when I was very young, I don't know just when; but it was because he died that my mother became a Wonder baker, and they gave me her job after her hip went bad and she had to use one of those metal walkers. I have to leave home at 4:00 A.M. to get to work on time, but my mother says she has to get up to cook my breakfast, so I always set the alarm for 3:00 to help her get dressed and to make sure her bathrobe sleeve doesn't catch fire—that happened once—from the burner. In the evenings, we play double solitaire or honeymoon bridge or checkers—"

"Use the past tense, Gordon," Kent said.

"—And listen*ed* to the radio," Gordon said, pronouncing the last two letters as a stressed syllable while looking at Kent with triumph. He chattered on to Jean and me, mainly about his childhood and his mother, but never was too involved with his memories to lack concern for us. I've heard it said that babies will cry at the distress of another small child, as if the world's sufferings were their own; in much the same way,

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Gordon couldn't control his sobbing when, in response to a question of his, Jean told him that her mother had become an invalid, too, following a stroke, and that her father cared for her until her death from a second stroke. As we finally rose to leave, Gordon said, "Please don't go," but Kent told him gently that we had to, that the visiting hours were over and that it was time for the two of them to rest before going outdoors for their daily innings of wholesome baseball fun. Still, we had to extricate our hands from Gordon's grip before we could rise from the bed. He gave us more cookies at the door, and put his arm on Kent's shoulder. "When will you come back?" he asked, as if nothing in this world mattered more to him. "Tomorrow?"

"As soon as we can," I said.

Walking with Jean under a cloudless sky to the parking lot, I saw, near a small tree, a rose bush in blossom, and thought, "How rich life is!", a response to the sufferings of others that immediately astonished me with its egoism. It was the kind of feeling I sometimes still have upon leaving a tragic play: a sense of the depth of emotion that invests life with its affirmative and yet terrible meaning, combined with relief that I have been nothing but a spectator. In 1956, I was youngish, roughly the age of both Kent and Gordon; unlike them, though, I knew only in an abstract sense what it meant to lose somebody who is deeply loved. My past life seemed but a preparation for my future. I was experiencing the freedom that comes in the interval between jobs, while being elated at the promise of my new position.

Three decades have elapsed since that June day. I now teach only in the spring terms, having elected to be on what is termed "phased retirement"; my employment line has already been transferred to a younger person on the Cornell creative writing staff. As I have aged, my emotional responses to the knowledge of mortality—my own, that of those I love, family members and close friends; for that matter, that of the civilization of which we all are a part—have continued to surprise me.

Last year, during one of my rare fall-term visits to the campus, I exchanged greetings in a corridor with a Far Eastern

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specialist who has translated various Japanese texts. I told her about a card an acquaintance of mine and his wife had received, upon the return home of a Japanese couple who had been at Cornell for a number of months. Since neither of the Japanese pair knew much English and both were bewildered by the complexities of establishing a domestic life in a strange country, my friend and his wife had shepherded them about in their search for an apartment, bed linen, kitchen utensils, and an initial supply of food. The card, no doubt purchased in this country just before the couple's departure, contained an engraved message that must have seemed apt to them: "Your thoughtfulness in our hour of deepest need will always be appreciated."

Having a knack for clever rejoinders, the Far Eastern specialist promptly gave me a related example of language misusage—one in which the underlying reference was, if not to death, at least to the keeping of life against the indisputable fact of our human mortality. She told me about the complimentary close of a letter, apparently written with the help of a dual language dictionary, that somebody she knew had received from an acquaintance in Poland: "May God love and pickle you."

I laughed at her illustration not only because it had outdone mine, but because I had just been freed (my most recent surprise) from a trap of my own devising, and was particularly responsive to anything that treated with humor matters I had been taking too seriously for my own good.

Mortality is a grim condition only if we make it so.

After six years of living on one of the busiest streets in Ithaca (and not long after the birth of our third son), Jean and I bought a rambling old house at a crossroads in a remote region of our Finger Lakes county. I had just been granted tenure, that juncture in a professor's life at which the choice of real estate reveals as much about his or her sensibility and expectations as does any list of publications or topics of planned work.

Though the only book I had then published was a critical study of the English writer E.M. Forster, I had written some fiction, including an unsuccessful novel that imitated the com-

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edy of an early novel of his. Disliking the use of the first person, I had nevertheless begun to write in that mode, and out of my own experiences, several years before determining to move to the country. One decision had intimate connections with the other, in that both were responses to a world that suddenly had altered, and not only in my own, and hence possibly idiosyncratic, apprehension of it. For the nuclear bomb, first used against another country by the United States to end the war in which I had been a soldier, now was being manufactured and tested by a third nation that might use it against us. If so, we would retaliate if we could; and that would be the end to everything that counted for much on our little planet. This cheerless prospect produced an intensified, widespread awareness of all the other horrors, including genocide, of which our species is capable, and reverberated beyond Freud's disquieting investigations into the nature of the human unconscious as far back, at least, as the discoveries by Darwin that had prepared the scientific climate for them. We have lived so long with such distrust in ourselves (particularly as nations) that to mention what, around 1960, came as a revelatory shock is to commit a banality.

But such a present-day banality caused several of my colleagues to take their lives, in 1960 and the surrounding years. One of them, a scholar I admired for his kindliness as well as for his humane texts on the American transcendentalists, chose to inhale the exhaust of his idling automobile engine in his closed garage. Next to his body on the car seat there lay the magazine I had given him the previous day for its article on the political gamesmanship underlying the Kennedy espousal of bomb shelters for American families.

Though anything but suicidal, my own response, as a writer, to the new knowledge surprised me: I had suddenly lost the ability or conviction necessary for the composition of third-person fiction. I began to write in the first person only, restricted to what I personally felt to be true, using memory to connect the present moment with the past; for I found that the attempt to construct people separate from myself made them subject to a social reality in which I could find no faith and to an intuited future over which they had no control and which somehow made them not people but lemmings

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marching (beyond whatever end I gave to their stories) toward a high cliff and an ensuing plunge into dark and icy waters. Conventional fiction (at least that composed on my own typewriter) struck me as a threat, in league with the forces leading to death. And yet the destiny I feared gave me an extraordinary infusion of love for my own family, for all individuals I had come to know and respect, and even for the tiniest creature or object in the natural world. I moved with my family to a country home because I wanted to separate my domestic life from the public and political world as fully as I could, while also desiring, like one of Forster's protagonists, to find meaning for myself and my family through a beloved place and the continuity it would provide with the past.

During the first spring in our Greek Revival farmhouse, Jean and I built a stepping-stone path through the mud between the woodshed door and the cow barn. Like the house, the barn was then more than a hundred thirty years old. Ours was the first non-farming family to occupy the property; while hauling stones for the path from the mounds of them at the edges of the fields (those cairns undoubtedly made as the land was being cleared), I thought it odd that none of our predecessors, who had to slog from house to barn for the morning and night milkings seven days a week, had bothered to build a stone path. I supposed that attention to cows and crops kept these farmers too busy to be concerned about mud.

In our case, it wasn't cows, but the lack of them, that created the need for a decent path. As I could tell from the size of the cistern beneath the porch and the three dug wells, water had been a serious problem on this farm. When the emphasis on rural electrification during the Roosevelt years finally made deep wells with their submersible pumps possible in this far corner of Tompkins County, one had been drilled between the house and the barn. It was the well that now supplied the house, but it says something about the priorities of a Depression-era dairyman that the water was for his herd and not his family. He had installed the pressure tank in the barn, and the warmth of thirty cows kept it from freezing. Without such a symbiotic relationship between water and the users of

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it, we were constantly turning on taps that gurgled and spat out only a drop or two. A heat tape on the supply pipe was inadequate. So were the Fiberglas insulation and bales of hay I placed around the tank; besides, they caused a heavy condensation that corroded the pressure switch. Even with the arrival of warmer weather, I had to trek back and forth to the barn morning and night to see if we were really out of water or whether I simply needed to push the restart button a half-dozen times while tapping on the switch case with a hammer.

Like many another couple with the dream of a rural sanctuary, Jean and I had spent all our money on a down payment for a farmhouse with lovely architectural lines; lacking the resources to hire a plumber to move the pressure tank to the basement, we decided to make the necessary trips to the barn as agreeable as possible through that series of little stone islands above the muck.

The task of laying the stones was less pleasurable than we had anticipated, for our pickaxes constantly hit large rocks three to six inches beneath the surface. Some of them we managed to pry up with an old drive shaft I found in the barn; they were smooth and flat as flagstones, and we used them in preference to the ones I had collected. Many of them, though, were too large to pry loose. Not wanting our path to wander around these hidden obstacles, we either found thin stones to place upon them or hauled dirt in the wheelbarrow to raise the ground high enough to bury the thicker ones. An obsessive determination to accomplish a goal can make the mind as rigid as the route it has planned. Only as we were struggling with our final stone did it occur to us that we probably had constructed our walk on top of another, now sunk from sight, that had been built by unknown predecessors—a conjecture whose rightness we immediately proved by probing deep with a pickaxe a foot or so on either side of our new pathway. We collapsed into laughter on the grass, the job having taken so long to complete on weekends that we were now well into the dry season.

Our work, then, lay in intimate contact with that of the dead—perhaps of the husband and wife who in 1831 had supervised the construction of the house (built by a carpenter,

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according to the information passed on to each new owner by the last one, "for fifty dollars and all the hard cider he could drink") and its assorted barns, the wood for which had come from the immense white pines the first farmer had cleared for his crop lands and pastures. I hadn't expected such a physical confirmation of a spiritual desire for linkage with the past. That confirmation both permitted and made credible my fancy to be buried in the old apple orchard behind the acre of grass, wild strawberries, chicory, and Indian paintbrush that constituted our backyard, and where I would be joined by those I loved, and the generations yet unborn.

In those days, any money I made from writing was so unusual, so removed from the calculations of the household budget, that I considered it mine, to use for any indulgent purpose; and so I appropriated a small royalty windfall to buy two horses, an old farm tractor with a plow and a cutter bar, a hay wagon, and a rusty manure spreader. The pair of horses cost four hundred dollars—with saddles, a supply of metal posts, a large roll of wire, and a fence charger thrown in. Through my labor, our own land would produce all the hay the horses needed. By such means, I hoped further to consolidate my sense of belonging to a farmhouse and its surrounding land.

The decades passed. The world endured, seemingly unchanged, whatever the limited wars and global anxieties of any given moment; but the passage of the years brought death to the other members of the family I had been born into—first to my father, Clayton, through pancreatic cancer, in Ohio; then to my older brother and only sibling, Jack, killed in an automobile accident at the entrance to O'Hare Airport near Chicago; and finally to my very old mother, Grace, who simply stopped breathing as she lay on her bed in our country house, where she had been living for ten years.

On the day after my father's death, my brother and I visited our parents' attorney, a man I had known for years (as a high school student I had done yard work for him) and who now was gray-haired and near retirement, one of those elderly small-town lawyers whose advice and sympathy at times of bereavement complement those of clergymen. "Now, I un-

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derstand what you are undergoing," this lawyer said to Jack and me, as we were standing in the vestibule of his old house, a Greek Revival much like my own, waiting for him to lead us into his office for a discussion of my father's estate, with its pitifully few belongings. "You are both aware, in a way that is new to you, that your own days are numbered."

Clichés, those long-dulled expressions of general truths about others, can become scalpels when used against us and our secret truths. My memory of these words is no doubt altered by my present awareness that Jack's days were to be more severely numbered than my own; but I believe that I hold the actual moment clearly enough in mind to re-experience the bond between my brother and me at that instant, as we looked at each other, knowing from the expression of embarrassment on the other's face that both of us were guilty of thinking of ourselves at a moment when we should be experiencing nothing but grief for a dead father and concern for a surviving mother and wife.

"No, you needn't feel any shame, it's natural," the lawyer went on, putting one arm on my brother's shoulder and the other on mine. "I responded the same way, and so does every son. Maybe it takes the shock of death for a son to realize that he has always identified himself with his father, and I suppose the same goes for a daughter and her mother. If you're like the rest of us, you haven't seen until this moment the necessity of making your wills."

As a veteran teacher of creative writing courses, one who has read many autobiographical accounts thinly disguised as fiction, I have come to know much about the hidden resentments and open antagonisms between children and their parents. At graduation time, during the receptions my college holds for the graduates and their families, I have often been touched not only by the affinity in bone structure that connects a particular son with the father with whom he seems to have spent his adolescence battling, but by an almost uncanny resemblance in gesture—a shy or defiant way of brushing back the hair, say—and in the timbre and mannerisms of speech.

During my first sabbatical leave, spent with my wife and children in Paris, I saw my father's face within my own, one

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day while I was shaving; perhaps because I was so far from America, perhaps because of a certain loneliness for home, I found myself not only accepting, but welcoming, the genetic bond I saw in the mirror, and I suppose I remember that moment because my response was so unexpected. For, throughout most of my adult life, up to my father's final months, I had tried to find my identity in opposition to what I took to be his, and only as he was dying was I released from my separate conception of myself; and now that Clayton was dead, as the old lawyer had said, I had been jolted into a new knowledge of the brevity of my own life.

Whatever the interpretation Freud gave to a Greek myth from his own observations and experiences within a particular epoch and its culture, I find it likely, from my own, that patricide is more the sublimation of a suicidal impulse than the result of sexual rivalry over a wife and a mother; at least, as best as I can imagine such a wild and uncontrollable disturbance, the son who would kill his father must be embittered by his own human condition, and be flailing to free himself from a biological entrapment that goes back through the ages.

My brother's death came so suddenly that it took me some days to accept it, a lack of comprehension that I shared (though with less psychological reason) with my mother, who then was in her nineties and already living with Jean and me. On the other hand, I had expected my mother's death, which came shortly after our celebration of her hundredth birthday. I had always felt myself to be close to her, especially in my childhood and in her final years, during which she had kept her wit and love for me and my family and had not permitted herself to fret over her declining strength. I worried during her last years about the effect her dying would have upon me; I understood Gordon as I had been unable to more than a quarter of a century earlier, and knew myself more fortunate than he—not only because my mother had lived so much longer than had his, but because I had a wife and children to love, and to be a support for me.

From Grace, who had met her own death without fear, I learned how much more terrible it is to lose a husband and

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then a son than it is to give up one's own life. If this was something I had previously known, I knew it so intimately from my mother's death that I considered it a truth I would never forget. Indeed, that knowledge made me so impatient with those poets who, having reached thirty, feel obligated to write self-centered poems about their mortality that once, in the midst of a lecture about a poem like that, I told an auditorium of undergraduates that only the young worry about their dying. The older you get, I said, the more you realize that nothing matters so much as the continued existence of those whom you love—and I said all this so persuasively, with such inner conviction, that the auditorium was filled with the kind of silence we sometimes hear when hundreds of minds are conjoined, as if telepathically, through a single voice.

How is it that we can continue to know something as a truth, perhaps the major truth of our stay on Earth, and still have part of our minds suddenly reject it? In the years immediately following my sixtieth birthday, I began to worry, without good cause, about dying, and to speculate as to what I would do if—like my father and his father before him; like, for that matter, my mother's brother and maybe those other, more distant, members on both sides of my family who had died of lengthy and undiagnosed ailments—I developed cancer.

On the day I visited Kent in the mental hospital, my own life, as I have said, stretched before me, full of promise. I suppose that, upon reaching sixty, I felt I had achieved whatever had been promised, and was looking back more than forward, and maybe wishing my talents had given me more than they apparently were capable of offering. Also, I had been presenting any number of eulogies at memorial services for older colleagues, as well as for lifelong friends—including one for Kent, whom Jean and I had loved enough to consider a member of our family.

His mental equilibrium had remained perilous, sustained by psychiatric treatment as well as by the depth of his caring for others, while being disrupted by the deaths of close acquaintances and the general violence and injustices of the world beyond—something his generation and mine might be

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particularly susceptible to, having absorbed in childhood from a more innocent America a belief in the stability and inherent goodness of things. But it was a heart attack that sent him to the hospital, where a second attack brought his death.

Kent had been a lexicographer for more than thirty years. At the memorial service, a colleague spoke of him as born to the craft, with a sensitivity to language, an inherent taste and style, and a sense of humor—an attribute necessary for a profession defined by Samuel Johnson, a lexicographer himself, as "harmless drudgery." The colleague mentioned that Kent's favorite dictionary definition was the one for *corncob*. Though it had preceded his tenure on the staff, Kent had jealously guarded the rhythm and resonant sounds of that humble object's definition ("The woody core of an ear of corn, on which the kernels grow in rows") through revision after revision of the dictionary. In my eulogy, I tried to explain those qualities of Kent's that contributed to my sense of the richness of life, as I had left him in the mental hospital in 1956.

Driving back to Ithaca from the service, Jean and I laughed at the story of Kent's preservation of a definition, but I found myself wondering how long *corncob* would be so defined, and how long dictionaries and their attempts at precision would matter, in a world that, in its rush toward Armageddon (a term that now and again found its way into our present American leader's public utterances), daily mangled not only the meanings of words but humans and their meaning. How much easier it would be to accept the biological fact that all lives, including our own, have an end if the future of the race promised betterment of our moral nature, if there was a genuine prospect of world peace for our descendants! A proposal like the recent one for "Star Wars," which increased the threat of what ostensibly it would avert, seemed to bear out the disturbing possibility that I first heard proposed during a 1960 lecture by a celebrated prophet of our culture—that as a fatigued and elderly civilization aware of a void where once it had found spiritual essence, we actually might be *willing* the blossoming sarcoma of the bomb. Such a conjecture is itself malignant, one we must oppose with all our might. And yet Kent's death from other causes increased my fear of dying from cancer, as if it were an inevitable scourge.

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It was not I but one of my sons who, late in the spring of 1985, developed the disease. Luckily, it was the form most amenable to treatment, through surgery and radiation; his cancer is not in remission, but apparently gone, burned out from the lymph system—though, to make sure, he will require annual checkups for several more years.

I was sitting alone at the picnic table in our enclosed side porch, eating a sandwich (on sunny days, I used to escort my mother to that porch, so that we could eat lunch there, while together turning the puffy white clouds we saw above the distant ridge of Connecticut Hill into an imagined bestiary and watching the occasional hummingbird poised just beyond the screen or glass) on the day that my son returned from a visit to his doctor, to say almost jauntily, "Well, I guess I've got some bad news."

Jean and I sat for three hours in the surgery waiting room of Tompkins Community Hospital, while our son's spleen was removed and biopsies taken from other parts of the lymph system and nearby organs—an operation whose outcome, we were told, could be considered especially favorable if it turned out to be unnecessary, the spleen having been discovered to be unaffected and no further tumors found. According to those terms, the operation was a complete success.

To regain his strength for the radiation therapy that again would sap it, our son took brief walks, then longer ones, and finally was jogging the four miles that constitute a country block in our region, or riding his bicycle the five miles to Connecticut Hill and then along the dirt roads and trails of the forested spine—a land use area—that he loved. In the evenings, waiting for his return, Jean and I had philosophical discussions about death, and the immense value it imparts to life. To realize that sooner or later every stranger you pass on the street is to die makes that person no longer separate from you. It seemed to us impossible that anybody possessed of enough imagination to know what death meant, either to himself or to another, could possibly lust for power over others, or could torture or kill a victim, or could desire to annihilate a competing power, a different people.

For his radiation therapy, our son had to drive daily to the Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse. Since the treatments sometimes made him feel weak or doubtful of the quickness

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of his responses, I usually accompanied him, to share in the task of driving. The trip from and back to our house covered almost a hundred fifty miles, all of them through the gentle hills of the Finger Lakes countryside, the portion near Syracuse along a crest of a wide and fecund valley created in the last glacial age. The days of that summer were unusually sunny and mild, and the visibility was sharp. Soon we were bringing along a pair of binoculars, so that the passenger could look at whatever in the distance took his fancy—a bird, a farmhouse on a slope, a dirt road winding up through a gap in the opposing crest and bordering a creek. On the return trip, if the treatment that day had not taken away my son's appetite, we would stop at a restaurant in a village not far from Syracuse, for the chef there made particularly appetizing soups; and while we ate, we would look at a detailed regional map, in order to find yet another route, however circuitous, back to our home—a route that would enable us, maybe, to pass a particular pond or one of the smaller of the Finger Lakes we'd never seen, or to find a dirt road that might lead to a glorious hilltop vista. Hidden by a buttoned and long-sleeved shirt were the indelible marks on my son's skin that outlined for the technician the area for the X-ray treatments; a baseball cap covered the new baldness at the back of his scalp.

Given the nature of our daily mission, why did those trips give me happiness? If happiness is not to be distinguished from hope, something we both had, it is to be sharply distinguished from an absorption in the self that makes a person perceive himself as a likely victim of his genes and of his century's ills. Even before my son had finished his sentence about bad news on the day I was eating my sandwich on the porch, I knew what he was about to reveal, and already was attempting, by an act of will that precluded any possibility of victimization, to transfer the nasty stuff spreading in his body to my own.

Despite the worry and the daily trips to Syracuse, I discovered myself quickly writing a comic novel (this time, one without a debt to Forster) about events on another planet, events that covered nearly everything that had distressed me about our own world for the past quarter century. Apparently the

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creative restriction I had felt since 1960 had vanished: if I was all of the characters I dreamed up, I was also none of them.

Meanwhile, I began to develop mysterious symptoms, and they continued long after my son's radiation treatments had been concluded. I developed rashes, facial swellings, throat obstructions (my grandfather had died of throat cancer), pains in the area of the pancreas (though my father had felt none), and spells of vertigo. Briefly, my blood showed an alarming decrease in white cells, a sure sign to me that my own lymph system had gone awry. While waiting for a promised letter from my doctor containing information about my latest blood test (why would he have written instead of phoning, unless the news was grim?), a letter which for five days was lost in the mail, I wrote on, chuckling as I went, for twelve to fourteen hours at a stretch, simply wanting to get the book finished before I died.

It is possible that some of my symptoms were the result of methanol or some other poison in the cheap imported wine I was drinking. The mind is a mighty instrument, capable of feats as miraculous as they are mad, but I doubt that mine was capable of affecting the nature of my blood. Still, all signs of disease vanished from my body at the time of my son's first checkup, six months after the therapy had been concluded, the thorough examination that showed *his* body to be free of cancer. However irrational my attempt to wrest a disease from my son by making it my own, the strength of my desire to do so has freed me forever, I would guess, from a consuming dread of it or any other possibly mortal ailment.

Having brought this chronicle of surprises up to the latest to occur, I sit at my desk in a large and (except for me and assorted cats and dogs) empty house, for both my son and wife are at Cornell, one a student older than most, his recent illness having determined him to prepare for a new career, and the other a long-time employee. As I look through a window at the snow from our first November storm now gleaming in the sunlight on the backyard and on the branches of the trees beyond it, I realize, from the very fact that I felt it necessary to write this account, that I have not really been lib-

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erated from myself, or from the reasons that brought me to autobiographical prose of this sort, and probably never shall, even were perpetual world peace and the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity to be pealed from every church bell tomorrow morning; for I contain within myself everything I have ever thought, every fear or pleasure I have ever experienced, whatever the stages I have passed through. And, in my opinion, for a brief span each of us is the still-living civilization itself, a microcosm of its past as well as its present—and so each of us is capable of responding with all of the old immediacy to the eighteenth-century rose bush we can no longer draw in the former way, to the Romantic symphony we can no longer compose, as well as to the subjective terrors and countless acts of bigotry and cruelty and large-scale violence that have marked our passage.

The trees beyond the yard constitute a young walnut grove that on its own accord (but with the help of squirrels) has replaced the old apple orchard where once I wanted to be buried. I see what is, but know what was, and again can feel that impulse to be part of this land, however much I recognize that neither I nor my wife nor my children can possibly rest beneath the blossoming apple boughs that, through the agency of a stepping stone path, gave me this fancy, nor anywhere else on ground whose ownership only temporarily has been vested in us.

Half the stones that Jean and I planted upon those of others have already disappeared beneath the earth, and the remaining ones have settled far enough into the turf to become separate stone-bottomed pools whenever it rains. For some years, we've had a new and apparently inexhaustible supply of well water, and the pressure tank has been moved from barn to basement; for that matter, the old cow barn was destroyed in a fire decades ago, to be replaced by a horse stable that I built with the help of my sons and wife.

But I continue to walk the path morning and night, to feed and stroke and speak to Smoky, our elderly remaining horse, whose affection I would win back. For Smoky's attitude toward me has subtly changed, ever since his recent discovery that I was incapable of saving the life of the thirty-year-old mare, Tammy, his beloved stablemate. She died, as horses

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her age frequently do—so the veterinarian who tended her told me—of a visceral cancer. Maybe what Smoky chiefly resents is that I was an accomplice in the difficult removal of Tammy's half-ton body from the stable, helping the man from the rendering works who had been recommended to me by the vet; in any event, Smoky no longer whinnies at my approach, and won't even look directly at me.

Horses have fine memories—in some ways, more remarkable than ours—but often they don't know how to use the past intelligently, in my opinion. For them, a frightening discovery or untoward occurrence remains isolated from all other events, never becoming simply an integral part of a larger and more forgiving context or world picture. "May God bless and pickle you, Smoky, you old fart," I sometimes tell him, vexed that he won't nuzzle my jacket pocket for whatever surprise—a carrot or dried ear of corn—I may have for him. Still, it just may be that tonight Smoky will be as glad to see me as I will be to see my wife and son returning together from their day at Cornell. It is also an opinion of mine that *tonight* is as far into the future as one's hopes or worries reasonably ought to go.

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PETER MAKUCK

Junk Trade

We were in Connecticut. I had pulled off the road so that David could take photos of muddy hogs and flights of pigeons with his new Minolta, but he was taking forever. It was hot and the stench of the piggery was awful. I whistled, told him to hurry—we had a carload of stuff to get rid of. Hogs sent up the pigeons again; they flickered in the sun like scraps of white paper.

In the car, he said, "Dad, do you think Mom will leave us?"

"We've been over this," I said. Rachel, on a whim, had applied for a job in Atlanta, and a week ago received notice she was a finalist.

"I don't want to move."

"Maybe you won't. She could fly home for weekends."

"Weekends!"

I had already explained to him the importance of his mother's work, her need for a sense of self, and saw no point in further talk about something still so iffy. "Let's just bury it for now. We've got other things to do."

"Slow down," he said, leaned out the window, and aimed his Minolta at the DEAD END, each bullet hole burning with light. He clicked off a few frames, and we turned from the tree shadows onto a sand and gravel track that came to a fence. In the open, just beyond the gate, was a man at a desk with cinderblock legs, a breeze riffling pages in the ledger before him. "He's asleep," said David. The guy had hair the color of Brillo, wore overalls and a faded workshirt. Our tires popping gravel jerked up his head. As I cranked down the window to a gust of rancid heat, he squinted at me through lenses taped at the bridge and lifted his hand against the sun. A younger version of the face came to me from years ago when, as a college flunk-out, I had worked for the town on the back of a garbage truck. It was Louie, but he gave no sign of recognition when I used his name. Instead, absurdly, he

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yelled, "Halt," heaved himself up from the chair, and hobbled toward the car with that limp I had forgotten.

I told him I had newspapers, a Hoover, wire coat hangers, rags, a recliner, a small AC unit.

He looked me over suspiciously and moved to the rear of the car as if to see for himself what was under the rope-tied trunk, but in the side-view mirror, I could see him check my license plate. He came back shaking his head. "Residents only—that plate says Georgia."

I explained that my father had recently died. I was cleaning out his house.

He was still suspicious.

"You could look it up," I said, pointing to his ledgers.

He hobbled around the desk. "What was that name and address?"

I told him. He licked his thumb and began to flip pages. The offal-haunted, green buzz of flies came from an open dumpster a few yards off.

"Jesus, Louie. It *is* Louie, isn't it?"

He said yes.

"If I wasn't *from* here, how would I know your name?"

Looking up from the ledger, he lurched back to the car.

I asked him if he really thought I'd drive all the way from Georgia to Connecticut just to get rid of junk here in the town dump. Hanging his face in the window, he said he was sorry, explained that space was the problem. Supply and demand. Other towns had run out of landfill space, were jealous, had even tried to sneak in truckloads at night. The town had to be careful.

I nodded. The impression was apocalyptic, garbage wars in the offing. When his speech was over, I changed the subject. Still wanting to establish myself as a former workmate, to prove something to my son perhaps, I ticked off names and asked for news. "What about Watrous?"

"St. Mary's, pushin' up daisies."

Stunned, I quickly moved to Phillips.

"Danbury." This was a euphemism for prison. "Stole some TVs," he said. Then with a smile: "He oughta be gettin' out pretty soon."

Finally I came to Steen, the other kid on my truck.

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"Doin' real good. See that?" He pointed to a mountain of junk. "He's in charge of the whole metal pile. You'll see him when you drop that AC unit." Louie was getting tired of my questions. "The rest can go in those dumpsters. Make sure you separate it apart into the right ones—paper, cloth . . ."

We drove ahead.

"Dad, how did Grandpa ever accumulate all that stuff?"

"How did you ever accumulate all that junk in your room?"

He laughed. After explaining what a milkman was, I told him how my father would be on his route before dawn, the first to see interesting things people put at the curb. I didn't want to recycle a cliché but found myself using what my aunt, more than once, had said yesterday at our yard sale: "One person's trash is another's treasure."

"Dad, that's dumb."

"Why?"

"I'd *never* touch anybody's trash."

"Never say never."

"Yuck, no way."

I told him that my father used to say you never know when something will plug a gap, fill a need.

"All those baby carriage wheels hanging from the ceiling?"

"Sure. Remember the red wagon with high sides he made for you when you were little?"

"I guess."

"Where do you think the parts came from?"

We got out of the car. I told him how, just as he had pestered me for that new Minolta, I had once pestered my father and mother for a boat. We lived close to a lake, and I wanted what I wanted. Like most kids, I was selfish and didn't realize what they couldn't afford. But one lucky spring noon, I was knocked over by the sight of a green bow sticking out of the roped rear doors of the Divco my father delivered milk in. A ten-footer, perfect for two or three kids, it was missing oarlocks, a few floorboards, needed caulking and paint. My father could repair anything. I could still see him smiling: that somebody thought the boat worthless made him all the more happy.

David pinched his nose. "Dad, how about later?"

The smell was potent. "That's perfume," I teased.

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Into the dumpsters went a bolt of canvas, two boxes of clean rags, stained lampshades, a box of inner tubes. David held a big boxful of comic stationery. "Hey, why are we getting rid of this?"

"Space," I said. "No room in the car."

"Gee, I *like* this paper."

"Take a few sheets."

"How about this much?" He held up a five-inch stack. "What's so funny?"

One day my father took me and two of my seventh-grade pals to the dump. Such trips were always adventures: BB guns and rats. But the purpose of this jaunt was to throw away two orange crates full of records, old 78s that my mother's friend Sophie had left behind when she took a job in Detroit. Years had passed, and still they remained unclaimed. From Sophie, no Christmas cards, nothing. For my mother, bewilderment turned into hurt. "Don't say anything about this to your mother," I was told with a wink, and we loaded the trunk of the Studebaker. At the dump's landslide edge, we spent a wonderful hour in a contest to see who could fly records the farthest. Out sailing over the cattail swamp went these black discs with titles like "Mammy" and "Tabby the Cat" and "I'll Be Seeing You." Redwings stirred and flitted, plummeting records made an abrupt rip when they knifed water or mud. But what I recall as well was that my father refilled those big orange crates with other things while "I'll Be Seeing You" and hundreds of other silent melodies sailed briefly over the waters of forever. We left with more than we brought.

"Dad, I *really* don't want to move to Atlanta. All the time on TV news, you see these drug addicts, murders, everything."

"David!"

For a while he was quiet. Then: "Dad, do you think that pile of refrigerators and stoves would make a good photo for the Boys' Club contest?"

"If you get the right angle," I said.

"How about the way the road winds up to it?"

The orange bulldozer that had been clanking and grinding suddenly shut down and a hush hung in the air like a new smell. Seagulls wheeled over tummocks in the smoky distance

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where, from even further, came the long moan of the Sandy Shoals foghorn.

When Johnny, my cousin, pulled into the drive in his Grand Sierra pickup, I went out to meet him. Hidden from view were two blond children, his wife-to-be's from a first marriage. A Vietnam vet with lingering problems, he had, after a series of menial jobs, taken courses and now was working for a company that made turbines for the navy. To everyone's surprise—and my aunt's relief—he was getting married; in fact, the wedding was just a few days off, and he had come to pick up bedroom furniture. Rachel knelt before the children and asked them if they would like to sit on a swing-bench that hung from the big oak out back. Sucking thumbs, they nodded yes.

Together and singly, Johnny and I made trips from house to truck until both bedrooms were empty. When I was carrying the dresser mirror, David backed and crouched, clicking off some kind of trick reflection shots. The truck was full, but I brought Johnny into the cellar and pressed some of my father's tools on him. "How about a saw?" I asked.

"Okay, I'll take one."

"Come on, he's got *ten*."

Johnny laughed. "Uncle Pep, he was a good guy." He talked about how my parents had looked after him when his father died, tried to help him out when he got back from Vietnam. "You know, sometimes I'd hang back about stopping to see them because there was no way I could leave without a meal or some money, and while your mother had me at the table, Uncle Pep would be loading my car on the sly. A TV, food, paint, tools, sweaters, gloves—you name it."

Our eyes paused at the twelve-gauge Remington I got when I turned fifteen; it hadn't been fired in years. I knew better, though, than ask him if he wanted it, or the .22 semi-automatic that hung just above. Johnny's eyes were clear blue and deep, like my uncle's, and looking at him, at the flared cheekbones, I could see my father too. I wanted to talk, but there was no time. And his children had become bored with the swingbench.

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Behind the wheel, he leaned forward, waved, and tapped the horn once as the truck began to move. The load was well balanced and tied. My mother's mattress was almost new, satiny white, and strewn with corn flowers that slowly vanished.

Ed, an old friend, lived just a few miles from my parents' house. Whenever we came to Connecticut, we spent a lot of time with him, and now that the phone in my father's house was disconnected, Ed was taking messages for us, and we were using his phone, a new one we joked about because it specialized in dialing wrong numbers, had a cricket-like ring, and might, we suspected, be a secret test item on a new line of disposables like razors, lighters, and flashlights. When I told him of our difficulties getting rid of all the junk, he laughed. "Oh yeah. Anything beyond your two standard barrels, you've got to practically gift wrap it, or they'll leave it in the street."

"Hey, when I was a lid-lifter—"I began.

"You'd take it all, right?"

"True."

He gave a mock sigh. "Ah, the deterioration of services!"

I told him I had seen a few of the old lid-lifting crew and that Steen was now in charge of the whole metal pile.

"You should have had more ambition," he scolded. "You always had more on the ball than those other garboonies. Today you could be King of the Dump, ruler of an empire."

"What did you do with the phone book?" I asked.

Ed, ever the self-mocker, said, "Out in the kitchen, on top of the metal pile, I mean the paper pile."

I found the directory and began flipping pages. Rachel was telling Ed about being a finalist for the job in Atlanta. Ed said, "But you've got a perfect situation where you are, don't you?"

"Well, Michael's position is secure, and there's a kind of Podunk happiness." She laughed. "I do some part-time consulting."

I called the Salvation Army about disposing of what remained from the yard sale. The house had to be emptied. Soon. In barely a week, David would start school; and I had a

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job to get back to. A woman's raspy voice said: "People used to bring in the leftovers of yard sales. Junk really. We can't accept that stuff any more." Her voice was like a recording.

I explained that it wasn't junk. I had a good easy chair, a hassock, sheets, blankets, mattress covers, dishes, lamps. . . .

"Well, if our truck comes to your house for pickup, insurance prevents our driver from climbing or descending more than two steps—Excuse me, will you please hold."

Muzak came from the receiver. I looked at Ed's kitchen. Clean but cluttered, it looked like mine before I got married. On the floor was a red and white DieHard taking a charge. My eye followed another power cord to the baseboard next to the cellar door: it was a small black speaker that emitted barely audible squeaks and had a chrome plate that said Super-Bug-Away.

In the living room, Rachel and Ed were talking about politics. Over a drink or two, they could argue for hours. Ed was sunk in his wingback, a two-foot stack of magazines and newspapers next to the chair. Paperback novels, video and audio cassettes stacked on every flat surface. David was fiddling with the stereo, ears muffed, head nodding rhythmically. Ed held up *Cancer Ward*, then dropped it on the floor. He was saying, "See? Now he's a non-person here too. Remember the Harvard Commencement when he said Americans had speedboats and snowmobiles instead of souls. Remember? We didn't *like* that. And now some guy's written a book about the anti-Semitism in his work." Ed smacked his lips. "Kiss of death. He might as well be in a Siberian gulag."

The Muzak stopped abruptly. "As we were saying, insurance prevents—"

"Yes," I said, "I heard that."

"The other thing you must realize is that what will be taken is completely at the discretion of our driver."

"You mean, he might not take everything."

"That is correct." Her voice was metallic.

"Great. What if we bring it in ourselves?"

"I can't make any promises."

I walked into the living room and repeated the punchline. Ed quaked with laughter.

David removed the headphones. "What's so funny?"

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"Listen," said Ed, "even the dump won't take certain stuff. Last spring, I had accumulated a lot of ashes from the fireplace there, drove out to see your garboonie pals. 'Forget it,' the guy says. Who's the one with the limp and gin-flowers on his nose?"

"Louie," I said.

"Well, Louie said he was sorry. But it happens I had just been to the package store. I figure, why not? I offer him a beer. We shoot the bull for a while. Between sips, he puts the can on the ground. 'I could get fired for this,' he says. Another beer, he starts to soften. 'The hell,' he says, 'dump the ashes over the bank. Anybody comes, make believe you takin' a piss.' "

"Nothing like getting your ashes hauled, huh?"

Rachel begged with a smile, looking furtively at our son.

"Remember when your old Ford gave up the ghost and Whaler Wrecking gave you twenty-five bucks for it."

Ed said, "I know. Now I'd have to give *them* twenty-five."

"At least."

Rachel, interested in a magazine article, asked if she could take it.

"Sure," said Ed, "but bring it back."

I looked at the cover. "This is three years old."

"I know, but there might be something I missed."

I asked if he wanted my rifles.

"Why not? If Super-Bug-Away doesn't work, I can just blast away."

The house was becoming horribly empty, but I could still see my parents in their favorite chairs, or moving about as usual. The temptation was to idle and mope, but there were too many things to be done. I was wondering how we would get my mother's rocking chair and my father's power tools and other odds and ends into the car. Geometry was useless. We would have to rent another car, or a small van.

"First things first," said Rachel. "Let's get this stuff to the Salvation Army and take our chances." So the three of us loaded the car, David reluctantly putting aside the Minolta. Halfway into town, I passed an Avis and turned back. The woman, chewing gum, asked me why on earth I wanted to go

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to Georgia, what with the heat, the drought, and the racist rednecks. She loudly snapped her gum for emphasis. After she told me there would be an additional two-hundred-dollar drop-off fee, I wanted to tell her a few nasty truths about Our Town, but the shortness of time pushed me out into the squinty sunlight again.

A thin man at the Salvation Army was smoking, giving everything an appraising look. Because there was no loading zone, I had to park down the street in front of an adult bookstore and carry every bursting box down the sidewalk. Sweating, I brought the last one into the store and set it down with the others. Between trips to the car, I kept thinking about how the thin man had casually slipped a Willowware serving platter from a box of dishes and slid it under the counter. He didn't know I had seen him. I remembered that platter from a Thanksgiving dinner, the set it belonged to. Until excused, my cousins and I weren't allowed to leave the table, and I remembered studying, out of boredom, the plate pattern—the pagoda with its tile roof, the blue birds, the bridge, and the boat, small with perspective, bearing the tiny lovers away. Suddenly that platter could have been solid gold, especially when the thin smoker complacently said he'd take everything but these pillows.

"Why?"

"Not healthy, somebody else's head's been on 'em."

"What about"—I gestured to all the used clothing—"that?"

"That's different," he said. "Besides, it's a state law."

"Fine," I said, "you're the boss."

I waited until he gave me the receipt. Then I went around the counter and retrived the Willowware platter. I never use the word "sport" with strangers and was surprised to hear myself say, "Sorry, sport, I changed my mind."

Our car wasn't quite big enough for the extra things. Things—the kicker. Much of me wanted to leave them. My problem was that I couldn't just drive away empty-handed, and, my father's son, I rebelled against the absurd fee for a one-way rental car to Georgia. Ed laughed. "Hey, why sweat a few bucks? The house here's going to sell. Rachel's going to be making big money." At his kitchen table, I sat with the yel-

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low pages, dialing one car outfit after another—even "Rent-A-Wreck"—waiting out the Muzak holds and blankly staring at the Turner reproduction that Ed, oddly, had hung over his stove, all the yellows and reds making me think of a grease fire, of the thin smoker, self-combustion. On one endless hold, I hung up.

Ed handed me a beer. "You know," he said, "I'll bet you could get an el cheapo airfare for Rachel and David, put on the max allowed for luggage plus a few extra well-tied boxes at—what?—a few bucks each, and that way you'd be able to fill the car, front seat and all, and not need to rent another, as they say down there in the land of cotton, "vee-hick-cul."

Rachel and I looked at each other. He was right.

It was a two-hour ride to the airport in Hartford. The ponds, hills, and stonewalls stayed with us most of the way. Very different from the flat red fields and walls of Georgia pines we now called home. Rachel talked about Ed and laughed. "He hangs on to all those old magazines. What a pack rat!"

David said, "Why does he keep all his stuff in the kitchen?"

Rachel said, "He's that kind of bachelor. Your father was like that too."

"And you saved me." This was our joke.

"Disorder is the punishment for disorder."

"Super-Bug-Away!" We were laughing. Then the airport sobered us with all of its spaghetti ramps, signs, and various kinds of parking; it had grown unbelievably. From the air, it must have looked like an insult, a new bubble in the strangled ganglia that was Hartford. I parked in front of the terminal. To my surprise, the person at check-in said nothing about our rope-tied boxes. Off they went on the conveyor belt and disappeared through a mouth of dangling black snaggles.

"Three days at the most," I said, giving her a hug and kiss.

"I feel bad about leaving you," she said.

"Don't."

"Dad?"

When I turned, he snapped a picture.

Normally I enjoy driving alone, but now I didn't. Once a pickup passed me with furniture piled in the back. Another

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time, I came out of distant thoughts, and a few feet away was a kid riding shotgun in a TransAm. I had apparently been gesturing and talking to myself, but before I completely registered his mocking face, the driver tromped it, and the car made the leap into hyper space.

Back at the house, I filled a Seagram's box with loose photos and family albums and a few things my mother could never let go of: one was a whale-oil lamp with a hand-painted chimney that her father had brought back from Japan. I especially wanted to keep her coffee mug with the blue tulip—made by a potter friend of hers—and planned to warm my hands with it in winter as I came slowly awake.

When I finally went into the kitchen, I found Ed had been there. A note taped to the refrigerator said: "A call for Rachel. The Atlanta deal. A Ms. Sallie Fearing said it's good news. Call by Friday about an interview. Tel: 912 . . ."

I thought about the joke where the doctor tells the patient: "I've got good news and bad news. . . ."

The afternoon quickly slipping away, I met briefly with the realtor, serviced the car, and bought some cassettes for tomorrow's long trek. A kind of panic had me speeding. Calm down, I told myself, and walked around the house, under the great lovely maples and pines. In the soft saffron light, as if out of *The Road Warrior*, a goggled man in a homemade gyrocopter flew low over the house, making an awful racket. For some reason I'll never know, he circled, then hovered. Though my father might have admired the mechanical ingenuity, he would have been shaking his fist at the noise. I stood on the lawn and shaded my eyes. Finally, after slowly rotating the craft, he banked and disappeared over the trees.

It was time to organize what, tomorrow morning, would be loaded into the car—the rocking chair first, then the Sessions clock, then the other things cushioned around it. The cellar still had enough junk for one more trip, but naturally, the dump was closed on Wednesday. Next to the garbage barrels at the curb were neatly stacked paint cans, a few wooden crates filled with rope, springs, and milk cartons full of used roofing nails. Six rickety TV tables. This was as much as I dared put at the street. The rest I would dispose of after dark.

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Not much more remained to be done. The light was almost gone. I pulled the plug on the refrigerator, propped a broom against the door to keep it open, and grabbed the last can of beer. Sweating, I looked at the empty rooms and knew I'd need a few more beers. It was quiet, the kind of woodsy quiet my parents liked: birds, a rabbit or squirrel rustling leaves beyond the stone wall, the occasional drone of a light plane. Every room was empty. I'd sleep on the carpet in the front room tonight, my last night ever in this house where I did my growing. The realtor was a family friend, and I could expect a good price for my boyhood, but that meant little. In Georgia I often thought about my parents, but here I could feel their presence. I knew every mood of air, every nuance of light and sound. The creak of a floorplank produced an image of my mother coming down the hall with the evening paper, the scrape of a sauce pan, my father making her coffee.

The quicksand had reached my neck when I noticed a blue Nissan pickup pass the house several times, each time slowing. At first I thought it might be one of those yard sale people come back for some item he might get, by now, for a steal. On the third pass, one guy leaped out, grabbed the six TV tables next to the garbage cans, and flung them into the back. Then the other peeled rubber as if having just robbed the First National Bank. Surely they had been sent to save me. I thought of Ed and began to laugh. Then the foghorn sounded in the distance, mist hovered over the swamp across the street, and I knew I had to get out before my mother did a nightwalk from her bedroom, or my father floated toward the street to retrieve his goods.

I killed the motor and lights. The upper stories of the new Town Hall were fuzzy in the settling mist; only a few office windows, here and there, framed with light. Crickets were loud. The dumpster I had parked next to had the town's name stencilled in white. What I was doing couldn't have been illegal, but the closely watched dump and the stringent pickup regulations had forced me into this nighttime stealth that suddenly had a dangerous feel to it. I was behind enemy lines, and nervous. To make matters worse, the dumpster was empty, and every time something hit the bottom, a great hollow boom reverberated in all directions from the parking lot.

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I was sure the building facade would blaze with light any minute now. Just as I was lifting four wooden jelly kegs from the car trunk, a pair of headlights swung around the corner from the direction of the police headquarters.

Sweating, I froze and watched the beams, given solidity by the building fog, slide and lance through the trees, then disappear into a glare that made me squint. The cruiser came on and stopped just a few feet away. A voice from within asked me what I thought I was doing? Didn't I know this dumpster was for the exclusive use of Town Hall personnel? Did I know the penalty for breaking local ordinance #2605? As directed, I walked toward the open window, and another light hit me in the eyes. He wanted a driver's license. Slowly he spelled my name, then made me pronounce it. "Funny," he said, "I used to know a jackoff by that name," and got out. "Hey, it's me, Joey!"

We laughed and shoved each other. He told me he had seen the Georgia plates at the house and had been planning to stop, shoot the breeze. The radio crackled. We swapped some history, tried to bring each other up to date. He had two children and was on the verge of promotion to detective. Then back to the present: "What, you trying to get the dumpster into your trunk?"

I explained, and he looked closely at the jelly kegs.

"Don't throw those out," he said. "These are oak. A little cutting—they make nice magazine racks." He was putting them into the trunk of the cruiser when a call came from the dispatcher.

"Gotta go," he said.

I asked what it was.

"Domestic disturbance," he said. "Come on, see what the world's *really* like."

I told him I had a few errands to run and invited him to join me later at the Bird's Eye.

The Bird's Eye was empty, bright, and as bad in its own way as the house. Beyond the brilliant green of the pool table, booths and stacks of beer cases lost themselves in the half dark. Cars, fog-dimmed, passed slowly in the plate glass. It was like being in a Hopper, but Harold had a sense of humor

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and liked to fill the air with talk and laughter. On the TV was a special about Hollywood's Golden Years.

I took my second beer to the pay phone and called Rachel. She seemed excited about the job interview, but not overly so. I asked how her flight was, and she asked me about last-minute business with the house. We agreed there was no sense talking long-distance about ifs. Yes, I'd pull off the road if I felt sleepy. We made our usual goodbyes.

Harold said, "Yeah, Joey's a good man, smart cop, too smart to come in here." He laughed, picking up my glass. "Another?"

I nodded.

"Ed tells me you're hard to beat on flick trivia."

The beer was starting to work. "Hey, one person's trivia is another's treasure."

"I'll test you for a beer," he said.

I told him he was on, and with his best Mexican accent, he said, "Badges, we dunt need no stinkin' badges."

"Every moron knows his Bogey flicks," I said. "You must be trying to hustle me."

"Name the actor then."

I knew it, but the beer wouldn't give me access.

"Bedoya, Alfonso Bedoya," he said, theatrically snatched one of my damp bills, and drew himself another beer.

When it was my turn I said, "Hut, hut, hut."

"Too easy. I'll just give you the stars—Pat O'Brien and Ronnie Reagan."

"Wrong."

"Wrong? We're talking about *Knute Rockne, All American*, aren't we?"

"No, we're talking about *Lawrence of Arabia*—O'Toole to the camel."

He waved me off. "Wiseguy. That white lightning they got down there's doing funny things to your mind." He set another beer on the bar and asked me when I was going back. I told him I was leaving in the morning. On the TV, Doris Day was singing "Qué será, será," and we started laughing again. Harold said, "Remember the flick where she's a stewardess, and Hugh O'Brien, the pilot, is hurt bad and she has to land this big four-engine job?"

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"*Crowded Skies*?"

"I'm not sure."

"Only so much junk you can keep in your head, right?"

Harold didn't laugh, and that made me somehow self-conscious. Suddenly I thought I might be in too good of a mood. I had no food in my stomach, and the beer had given me a boost. I thought about calling Ed to thank him and say goodbye, but over the years we had avoided that kind of direct leave-taking, and I'd probably see him within a year anyway. I looked at my watch. Joey, I knew, wouldn't show up. For a while I thought he would. Tired, I'd shut myself off after this one, creep home through the fog, and sleep on the living room floor. For a pillow, I'd wrap my running shoes in a towel. At dawn I'd be on the road, plug Freddy Hubbard's "First Light" into the cassette player and let that hard-driving tempo take me down the Connecticut Turnpike and past New York. After Jersey I might get the sense of possibility that a long drive always provided. But there was still tonight, this bar, Harold, some laughs. Don't think about anything else, I told myself.

And for a long time, I didn't.

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RONALD DE FEO

Solo Pass

I felt that I looked ready now so I asked for a solo pass. I had asked twice before, but the doctors had said no. They said that I wasn't quite ready. Now I suppose I was quite ready, though I felt much the way I did when I wasn't, except for a tinge of calmness, of control that had come over me unexpectedly, strangely in recent weeks. I didn't push things. Some patients when they're ready for a solo pass ask for a whole day on the outside. But I told the doctors that I'd leave after lunch and be back around five o'clock. They obviously were impressed by such a conservative, mature request. Fine, they said, no problem, make a good half-day of it. I'm learning to understand their thinking and how to impress them, which according to my roommate Albert is the first big step towards getting out of here for good. Albert should know. He goes mad periodically and has been in and out of this place as well as in and out of other mental wards in other hospitals all over the city. "I kind of look at them as hotels: the Hotel Parkway General, the Hotel St. Agnes. Sometimes, if you're far enough gone, there's even free car service direct to the front door. You can't beat it. And this place is one of the best. Nice rooms, wall-to-wall carpeting. There's only one big problem: it's easy to check in, but very hard to check out. So I try to be a good guest, impress the management, encourage them to unlock the door even though I haven't paid my bill."

I wasn't as nervous as I might have been about going out. After all, I had been out a few times before on a group pass. But on a group pass you join other patients with group passes and are led by a nurse or aide and can walk only a few blocks from the hospital. No one on the staff is in uniform and no patient is in hospital dress, but people on the street usually realize that this group is pretty peculiar. Particularly when some patients are heavily medicated and walk about fuzzy-

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brained and half-alive or wear odd combinations of clothes, like Mrs. Clark who went out one day with rainbow-colored stockings, a plaid skirt, a striped blouse and a fur piece that looked like it had been killed out of mercy. Or when a patient is too free and loud, like big Wally Weston who would comment on wonders passing by. "A PUPPY!" he'd yell on seeing any small dog, or "Gee, but I'd like her to be the mother of my child!" on seeing any attractive woman. I liked Wally, but I learned to keep away from him on group walks. In fact, I tried to keep my distance from the group in general while still being a part of it. I'd walk alertly, commandingly, as if I were an aide and responsible for this sorry collection of souls. I think I fooled a lot of people. Once when we were waiting for the light to change at the corner and I was standing at the rear of the group, a man on the street began talking to me. "I don't envy you," he said, "having a job like this. Must get to you every now and then." "I try to control it," I said. "They retarded or what?" "Psych ward," I said. "No kiddin'. What's that like?" "Crazy," I said.

Any anxiety I had now about going out came from the new situation—there wouldn't be anyone with me this time. It's funny. When I was with the group, I wanted to get away from them. They humiliated me by their presence, their obvious sickness. Now I wondered how I would do without them, particularly if I began to feel shaky, sensed all the space and emptiness around me, with no one to cling to if I felt myself growing weak, losing control.

I thought that if I at least looked good for my solo I'd feel better. So I phoned my uncle Arthur, who has been a rock through all of this, or a stick or a brick, whatever the expression, and asked him to go to my apartment and bring me my tweed suit, the best suit I have, and my tan raincoat, the best raincoat I have, in fact, the only one I have, but a superior coat nonetheless. And I also asked for a clean white shirt and a red knitted tie that had been imported from London and originally made in Oxford or Cambridge or Stratford-on-Avon, some such impressive place, and that I had bought in an elegant little shop one day when I was growing more and more depressed and needed a treat to lift me up, prevent me from reaching the dangerous rock bottom gloomies, as Albert calls them.

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I shaved my face a few times, trying to get it as clean as possible. This isn't so easy what with the disposable safety razors they give you here, a narrow dull blade practically embedded in a plastic holder. Since a dirty shadow was still showing after all my efforts, I rubbed some talcum powder into my skin to make it lighter, cleaner. I looked a little like a corpse now, but that seemed better than looking like a bum. My tweed pants used to fit perfectly. Now they were too big in the waist and baggy in the legs. I had the same problem with my once form-fitting white shirt, which was now so roomy in the collar that I could stick two fingers between it and my neck. This is what misery and confusion can do to you if you're not careful. I blamed my brain for my skinny, pathetic state, but I suppose this place, this atmosphere didn't help. Still, when I was all dressed up, you didn't notice the bagginess so much or if you did it was an elegant kind of bagginess that you could respect. Most of the time I'd be wearing my raincoat over all this bagginess anyway. And my raincoat, thank God, was both elegant and unbaggy.

By the time I walked into the day room everyone was already eating lunch at the big, long table they have there. They looked up and saw this tailored thing before them. Some of them looked at me as if I'd gone seriously crazy and had dressed up in a ridiculous costume. Others seemed envious or jealous, as if I had suddenly gotten well, gotten normal and didn't belong here any more. Wally was impressed. "Wow!" he cried out, pointing. I could have been a puppy. "Would you look at the movie star," said Mrs. Clark. I didn't know if she was being nice or sarcastic or, worse yet, really serious. "Nice" was all Albert said. He seemed to be entering the gloomies. I began to feel uneasy. No one spoke much during the meal except Wally, who kept asking me where I planned to go on my solo trip and kept giving me suggestions, like the zoo, a pet shop, Woolworth's, Burger King, a peep show. I tried to calm him by giving him food I didn't want, including Noodle O's and part of my dessert—Lorna Doones, his favorite—and not looking in his direction but rather out the window at the intensely cheerful day. *Windows*, I should say, because that's what they are, little square panes of glass, like in an English cottage, only these are set in steel frames, which you try not to think of as bars. I guess I love

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England and when I get old I would love to retire there, if ever I could hold a job long enough to retire from.

Rather than going through a lot of strange good-byes, I slipped quietly into the kitchen with my tray, placed it quietly on the food cart and went into the hall to the nurses' station. The nurses and doctors gather here, behind glass, as if they were normal people on display. They also regarded me with surprise. I had turned into something weird. One nurse even nudged another. I'm too baggy, I thought, and quickly put on my raincoat. While I waited for Dr. Petersen to fill out my solo pass, I looked around the station and noticed a little, cross-eyed, dopey-looking plastic man standing on one of the nurses' desks. He held a sign that read: "You don't have to be crazy to work here, but it helps." Dr. Petersen asked me how I was feeling. I said "Fine." She seemed a bit concerned. "Any specific plans?" she asked. "I may take a bus," I said. "Oh." "Then get off when it feels right." "Uh huh." "Walk around a little." "Sounds good." "Yes," I said cheerfully. I have this gift for appearing happy. "Any voices lately?" "Only from the radio," I said. The joke put her at ease, which was my intention. "Especially Bonnie Tyler's voice. You always hear it in the day room." "Who?" "She has a big hit. 'Total Eclipse of the Heart.' It's stupid, but it sort of gets to you." Dr. Petersen smiled. "I'm afraid I'm limited to the classics," she said. "So was I before I was committed." Yes, she seemed impressed by the entire way I was conducting myself, and wished me luck, with a certain confidence. Which only goes to prove how even they can be fooled. Just a few days before, in the middle of the night, I had awakened in a panic. A voice, which sounded in my mind like my voice, was telling me to let loose, to stop trying so hard to hold myself together, to let fear have its way.

Margaret, the head nurse, unlocked the ward door. I stepped into the corridor and the door locked behind me. I remembered leaving home for school all by myself for the first time. I remembered as a teen-ager untying a rowboat from a pier and suddenly drifting off into the bay, alone, with the choice of losing myself to the current or taking control.

I entered the elevator. I thought: they're really letting me

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out, they're really confident that I'll return. The group must have given me strength because now, on my own, I was soft and unsteady. I held on tightly to the support bar. The door opened and a red-headed nurse walked in. I had seen her a few times when I had been down on the medical floors for tests—lungs, stomach, brain. She turned to look at me, then stared ahead, then turned to look again. I smiled to myself. She just couldn't place me. A doctor stepped in and greeted me. I had never seen him before. "So how are things in Urology?" he said. "What?" I said. "Aren't you in Urology?" I shook my head, somewhat embarrassed yet honored by the mistake. "Pathology?" he guessed again after a long silence. "Psychiatry," I finally said as we reached the lobby.

I handed the pass to a guard at the front desk, pushed open one glass door, then another and stepped into the street. Everything was too bright. Cars and store windows gleamed so much they hurt my eyes. Buildings seemed overexposed, vague. I didn't remember things being this way on group walks. There also was too much air, and it was colder than expected, as if the season had changed since my last time out. I looked up and down the avenue which extended endlessly into the distance. There was all this space and freedom, so many possibilities. The whole business disturbed me. There were too many choices.

For a while I waited by the entrance, trembling slightly. The thought of turning back made me better for the thought alone was enough. Now that I realized I could turn back, I was ready to go on. An ambulance, screaming crazily, pulled up at the emergency entrance. I wondered if the person inside knew what had hit him. There you are one day, going about your business, in the pink, when suddenly you change, done in by your body or by your brain, and you find yourself in a hospital and hope they can change you back before it's too late. You curse your body, you pray for it. You can't trust it any more. You can't trust life. It's changed. You've changed. Whether you get better or not. You've changed for good.

I started walking away from the hospital, heading uptown. The hard ground hurt my feet, which had gotten very used

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to the nice, soft carpeting on the ward. After the fourth block, my soles were in real pain. I began to feel odd again. I had just passed the point where our group walks usually ended. I looked back at the hospital. Already it seemed far away. I tried to calm myself, to talk myself down as Dr. Petersen would suggest. If only I had a pill. They had a pill for everything. Maybe they had a pill to control you while you watched your hospital getting smaller.

The area around the hospital was quiet, with a lot of old factory buildings and lofts and a lot of hidden people. Now I was entering a new section with more traffic and bigger buildings and people moving about on business and pleasure. I walked into the flow and nobody noticed. Here I was, an active, current case, and nobody even gave me a second thought.

As I walked I became more accustomed to the light and the cold. Neither was as intense as before. I decided to push my luck, as they say, and take a bus uptown. Several came and went. They looked too crowded. They looked too stuffy. They looked too old. They looked too new. I thought up a lot of excuses. Finally one came that had a few empty seats, an open window and seemed sort of middle-aged. I couldn't deny that I had hit the jackpot.

We were moving slow, but somehow fast enough to take my breath away. It was as if I hadn't been in a moving vehicle for years, yet in fact it had been only a few months ago, when I had been leading something resembling in some ways, but not enough, what they call a normal life. At that point I was unemployed, normally, and frightened, normally, of what my future would be like as a well-dressed street tramp. Not so normal was my visit to the unemployment office. It was not only the biggest social event of the week, it was the only social event of the week. I should have realized then what sad, dangerous shape I was in.

The people on the bus were remarkably well-behaved. They didn't talk to themselves or make any strange faces or have any tics or feel the need to rock back and forth or let out a cry every now and then. They looked contented, tired, bored. They were, I must admit, a very uninteresting, unexciting lot. I sat in the middle of a row of people. Across from

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me was another row of people, doing many of the things my row was doing—reading, staring into space, looking outside, nodding off. Guess where I've been? I suddenly wanted to say, but managed to prevent myself.

I started to recognize stores and buildings gliding by outside. We were nearing my old neighborhood. A whole crowd of people got on the bus, handing transfers to the driver. One of the new passengers was an elderly unshaven man wearing an elderly black overcoat dotted with lint. "Goddamn buses," he shouted. "Always breaking down. It's a disgrace. It's criminal. Either you miss them because you're not an Olympic runner or else you catch them and they break down. *And they call this bus service. Where the hell's the service?* It's a disgrace. I'm eighty-two years old and I'm not going to make it to eighty-three." Upon hearing this, a young woman offered him her seat. He angrily declined. "No, I don't care now. I'm eighty-two years old and headed for the grave. What's the difference if I sit or stand? I'll be lying down for good soon." He continued to shout, shouted even louder, in fact, using the same words and phrases over and over again. A lot of other passengers became irritated, not with the bus service but with him. A few even told him to shut up. But in my mind I cheered the old man on. That's it, I said, don't hold it in, let it happen, go crazy, join us. This was the first time I had thought of myself as belonging to an *us*.

I got off at my old street. It wasn't the way I remembered it, but wider somehow, newer. There was a foreign feeling about it. Above the candy store near my building I noticed that part of the sign read: "Cigarettes and Newspapers." I was sure that I had never seen those words before. As I got closer to my building I slowed down, then stopped. While everything else around it was fresh and clean, my building was dirty—a dirty, ugly, red brick thing. The doctors had warned me not to return to my apartment just yet. After all, it had been a place of despair, a place of sickness, of madness. I was curious to return, to test myself, to see if I could stand it all. But then I thought of the sunless room, the voices in the walls serving as my only company, the police taking me away. I turned and headed back down the street. For some reason I felt like crying.

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I hurried for another bus. It took me to elegant streets with fine restaurants and shops and art galleries. I used to go to these galleries when I was well. I don't know much about art, but seeing all kinds of scenes and shapes and colors cheers me up. Besides, it's a cheap way to entertain myself. The people walking these streets were even less exciting than the ones I had left behind. They appeared to have nothing better to do than stroll around looking wealthy and tanned. Yet I was a little happier in this neighborhood. You felt secure here, felt that it was so neat and orderly that nothing could ever go wrong, you could never go wrong. It also was very clean. A man in a cocoa raincoat passed me. It was the cleanest cocoa raincoat I had ever seen. Later I saw other raincoats almost as clean. All this intense cleanliness began to seem sort of stupid, cowardly. Why fear a little dirt?

I stopped into a gallery showing old English watercolors. England seemed to be calling me. I stared hard at the countryside scenes, trying to feel myself in them. A man came up to me. He was tanned and very clean. "Yes, that one is particularly beautiful," he said. "Ah, yes," I said. "Top quality there." "I'm sure," I said. "Comparable to early Turner as far as I'm concerned." "You may be right," I said. I didn't know what he was talking about. "No question at all. And for only nine thousand it's a unique bargain, absolutely unique." "Seems so." "I have more in the back," he said. "Let me show them to you." And with that he guided me to an office that had many framed pictures resting against the walls. He showed me several. I stopped at one, a scene of Oxford, and asked him the price. "Only eleven thousand. Beautifully done. Real charm there." I wanted to tell him how nice the picture would look in my room back on the mental ward and wondered if he would consider fifteen dollars. I told him instead that I would think about it. He handed me his card. "Don't wait too long," he warned. "This may not be here tomorrow." I may not be here tomorrow, I wanted to say.

I visited several more galleries. I must have looked fairly distinguished because the people working there greeted me pleasantly, with respect. My raincoat and all the tweed underneath were going over very well. I was pleased. Although I didn't have many clothes, I apparently had extraordinary taste. In one of the galleries there were these huge canvases

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with paint thrown all about and ugly heads and twisted bodies caught up in the entire mess. I think the artist was trying to come off as disturbed. He should have seen the group mural we all did one day in occupational therapy. Each patient, one at a time, went up to a great long sheet of paper taped to the wall and drew whatever his sick mind told him. There were Mrs. Clark's amoeba-like wallpaper designs, Wally's sloppy puppy and rocket ship, Elena's muscle-bound nude boy, Jack's big staring eyes, Natasha's black butterfly with top hat, Andy's happy house with happy people, my Big Ben. Seeing all of this together made you sort of nauseous. But at least it was sincere, it was what *disturbed* is all about.

My legs and back began to ache badly, which was understandable for I hadn't gotten this much exercise in months. At about the same time, as if the parts of my body were conspiring against me, my stomach started growling and my head, worrying about the emptiness of my stomach and the possibility of starvation, also began to ache. There was a coffee shop nearby and I headed for it. The menu in the window indicated that I could get a cup of coffee and a donut for a couple of dollars so I decided to treat myself. It was Uncle Arthur's money anyway. "Don't spend it all at once," he had said, joking I think.

The place was pretty crowded for such an off time—a lot of middle-aged women wearing a lot of gold jewelry and smoking cigarettes. There was one seat left at the counter so I took it, sitting between two of these women. Smoke rose up from the open grill, smoke rose up from the coffee machine, smoke rose up from the women. Maybe it was because of the lack of good air or the heat of the crowd or my tiredness and slight headache, but I felt myself getting steadily nervous. It was nice to order something again, to be in command, to be served as a normal human being. It was nice not to eat off a tray, and nice to be trusted with a sharp knife. But I noticed that my hand was shaking as I poured the milk into my coffee. I couldn't understand the feeling. Was I creating it? Was it coming from outside of me? I took off my raincoat to get cooler. It wasn't enough. Yet I couldn't remove my warm tweed jacket for I had to maintain a certain dignity even here. Someone was talking to me. I realized it was the woman to my right. "What?" I said. "Could you please pass the sug-

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ar?" In passing the sugar, I almost knocked over the milk. "Thanks, dear." I tried to smile. I remembered how this feeling had come over me one day at work. I remembered how it had gotten worse, causing people to wonder and worry. Sweat was dripping from my face on to my tweed jacket. It made me jump. For it was colored sweat, sweat with something in it. I didn't understand at first. Then I recalled the talcum powder. I was sweating it off. I quickly patted my face with my napkin. "What kind of donut you say?" the man behind the counter asked with a funny accent. "What?" I said. "Plain, glaze-ed, sugar." I wondered if my patting was taking off more powder and leaving big, clean spots of skin. "Glazed, I guess." "We got one glaze-ed left. It's all broken. You want?" "Anything," I said abruptly. "You OK? You look pale a little." I'm suffering, I wanted to tell him. I've suffered. You wouldn't believe how much.

I turned away from his eyes and the eyes of his partner, whom he mumbled something to. And when I turned away and looked around, that's when I noticed it. Against the wall, just above the glass case where they kept the cakes and pies and puddings was this curved metal mirror. In it you could see most of the shop. And there I was in the curved, crowded scene. There I was with all these people. I should have been proud. But I was frightened instead. For the first time I was aware of how far I had come. This was me. Alone. Away. In here. This was happening.

I had nothing smaller than a five-dollar bill and I couldn't wait for change, so I left the whole thing on the counter and hurried for the door. I was lucky enough to get a cab right away and we sped back downtown. I opened the window wide and kept taking deep breaths, as if I expected a lot of air to make my brain semi-normal again. When we got into heavy traffic and had to move slowly, I distracted myself by concentrating on people walking by. I didn't have much respect for them. They went about with too much ease, functioned too well. They didn't have our difficulties. But someday some of them might, any one of them might. For now, they were just children. They hadn't been tested. They knew nothing. Their world wasn't real. They were so inexperienced they hadn't even realized that a madman had been among them for an entire afternoon.

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I gave the driver some ridiculous tip. He seemed pleased. "Have a good one," he said. Have a good *what*? I wanted to ask. I was feeling a little better now, maybe because I was right by the hospital. Instead of going in, I went to a newspaper-magazine shop a block away. I didn't have much money left but I wanted to bring back some sort of gift from the outside, just to prove I had been there and had purchased something all by myself. So I got some magazines—*Travel and Leisure* for Albert, *Beautiful Interiors* for Mrs. Clark, *Dog World* for Wally and *Hunks* for Elena. While I was making my selection, I heard "Total Eclipse of the Heart" playing on a radio they had in the store. The song sent a chill through me and I waited around to hear it to the end. It was our song.

"Visitor?" asked the guard at the front desk. "Patient," I answered. "Ward 13. I've been out on a pass." Somehow I was glad giving this identity.

Bobbie, a young nurse, answered my knock on the ward door. She smiled at me as I entered. I stood in the hall and took off my raincoat. I heard the television blaring in the day room and saw some of the patients gathered there. Natasha, a small crazy Russian lady, walked by me in a housecoat and was going on again about Dr. Mortonsberg, the head of the unit. "He is a gangster," she said. "He has taken everything from me. Money. Stocks. Bonds. My underwear is next. He is a notorious gangster. And a cockroach." Suddenly kicking and screaming broke out from the quiet room, where they lock patients who get a little violent. I recognized Jack's voice. He was going crazy again, trying to kick open the door.

When I had first arrived on the ward months ago, the patients, the sights, the sounds had almost made me sick. I'm going to go completely mad in this place, I had thought. But now I had gotten used to it all. And as Natasha argued with a nurse who ordered her to her room and Jack kicked and screamed and patients laughed crazily at the television set, a thought crossed my mind that made me very happy and at the same time terribly scared: I was home.

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MONROE K. SPEARS

Montaigne Our Contemporary

Wasn't Montaigne really just a quaint eccentric? Progenitor of all too many later essayists, excessively informal, overly familiar and all too personal, in the genre he invented? Amusing, unpredictable, but overloaded with classical quotations to show off his learning, and essentially rather superficial? Mainly of historical and even antiquarian interest, to put it plainly, and not seriously relevant to our more complex and sophisticated times?

Most of us, I think, are glad to have any such unworthy suspicions laid to rest. We want to believe that Montaigne, like Shakespeare and all great writers, is our contemporary, and we respond with a lift of the heart to any affirmation of this belief (as in the title of Jan Kott's book on Shakespeare, 1961, which I echo in my own title). Eliot's memorable image of the monuments of past and present as having a simultaneous existence and forming a simultaneous order, with the present affecting the past as much as the past the present, has accustomed us for some seventy years to think of the great works of the past as contemporary insofar as they are part of a living tradition. But my hope is not merely to elicit an easy assent to the statement that Montaigne is in some sense our contemporary. For this assent is succeeded very soon, I think, by misgivings: we do not want to say that Montaigne is *merely* contemporary, for few of us are willing to equate "contemporary" with "good": we hope to learn from the past, and to assume that only that is valuable which is *like* the present is a procedure guaranteed to make the past meaningless. So the question becomes, not only how Montaigne is contemporary in the sense of anticipating or confirming our beliefs, but what we can learn from the historical perspective of his nonmodernity.

Fortunately—since to write an essay on Montaigne, the great essayist, is an enterprise as foredoomed as writing about

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Shakespeare in blank verse—I have a book to review that presents a thoroughly modern Montaigne. Jean Starobinski's *Montaigne in Motion*[1] is an acute and subtle book which manages at the same time to avoid all oversimplification. Although Starobinski makes some fascinating suggestions, he resists what must be the greatest temptation for someone with his training: to reduce Montaigne to psychoanalytic terms. Instead, what he does is to present Montaigne as a unique individual, seen in the context both of his time and our own, and interpret his work in terms of what Starobinski takes to be the basic question behind it: "Once pessimistic philosophy has repudiated illusory appearances, what then? What remains to be discovered by an author who has denounced artifice and dissimulation on all sides? . . . If words, language, are indeed a 'commodity so vulgar and so vile,' how paradoxical it is to write a book . . .! The *motion* that the present work will attempt to trace is that which, starting from the question raised above, encounters the paradox from which there is no easy escape."[2] His purpose is thus to trace the consequences of an act which was "both intellectual and existential in nature," and his reading is "an interrogative one, whereby the critic attempts to clarify his own situation by interpreting, without doing violence to the specificity or remoteness of the text, a specimen of . . . the living past." He compares his chapters to musical variations "on the theme of a sophisticated return to the world of artifice and appearance repudiated at the outset." These variations "help to clarify the original theme as it is taken up and repeated by one voice after another: friendship, death, freedom, the body, love, language, and public life." These are the topics of his seven chapters.

Like J. P. Richard, the earlier J. Hillis Miller, and Roland Barthes, Starobinski—a leading member of the "Geneva School"—is a phenomenological critic, concerned with the writer's "way of experiencing the world" and "structuring consciousness." Though he deals accurately and lucidly with Montaigne's thought, he does not become preoccupied with

[1] MONTAIGNE IN MOTION, by *Jean Starobinski*. Trans. by *Arthur Goldhammer*. University of Chicago Press. $30.00; $14.95.

[2] The French word here and in the title is *mouvement*.. Though I am conscious of my temerity in questioning a translation so generally excellent, I feel that *motion* has too much connotation of the physical to be entirely appropriate as English equivalent. I should prefer the more obvious *movement*.

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either a "development" from Stoic to Pyrrhonist to humanist/fideist or Montaigne's relation to—for example—Rousseau (about whom Starobinski has earlier written another brilliant book). The critic who is expert in dealing with ideas is not usually sensitive to style and psychology, and vice versa; but Starobinski seems equally sensitive to and interested in both. His special awareness of Rousseau, whose work "is in so many ways—as autobiography, as pedagogy, as social and political theory—a response, at times a quite conscious response," to Montaigne, gives him an interesting perspective.

His Montaigne is profoundly serious in confronting what we see as the ultimate questions. The one weakness of the book is probably impossible to avoid if this kind of presentation is to be successful: though Starobinski is certainly aware of these aspects of Montaigne, his portrait rather neglects the elements of playfulness and humor, of teasing and joking with the reader, of making him an accomplice, pleasurably outraged by Montaigne's naughtiness, impetuosity, unpredictable shifts of mood.

Starobinski, then, brings Montaigne to life by treating him as our contemporary and asking him modern questions. The resulting portrait may be called, in the large sense, existentialist.[3] He emphasizes Montaigne's act of choice, after retiring from the world and confronting the deceptiveness and futility of the world of books, in deliberately turning back to them and validating them through writing. By implication, Montaigne has preceded these choices by the ultimate one, in choosing not to despair and commit suicide.

But one of Montaigne's most prominent recent appearances, some forty-odd years ago, had been in a quite different role. W. H. Auden, in the epigraph to *The Double Man* (1941) which explains the title, quotes Montaigne: "We are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn." The passage comes from the essay "Of Glory," where Montaigne quotes Epicurus' advice to Idomeneus to regulate his actions with no regard to public opinion or common renown. Epicu-

[3] Since existentialism, in its postwar, dominantly French version, is now more than forty years old, its contemporaneity might well be questioned. But in the larger sense, as the latest version of a broad trend beginning with St. Augustine and including Pascal and Kierkegaard as well as Kafka, Sartre, and Camus, it is certainly still alive and apparently central.

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rus' view, says Montaigne, is true and in accord with reason. But Epicurus' last words show him thinking of his own renown and contradicting his own teachings.

Auden quotes Montaigne from Charles Williams' *Descent of the Dove* (1939) and follows Williams closely in describing "LUTHER'S faith and MONTAIGNE'S doubt" as opposite poles of the Renaissance. In the notes to "New Year Letter" (line 1213) he adds twin sonnets as commentary on the line. The sonnet later entitled "Luther" begins: "With conscience cocked to listen for the thunder" and ends, " 'All Works, Great Men, Societies, are bad; / The Just shall live by Faith . . .' he cried in dread." This is followed by a sonnet on "Montaigne's doubt":[4]

> Outside his library window he could see
> A gentle landscape terrified of grammar,
> Cities where lisping was compulsory
> And provinces where it was death to stammer.
>
> The hefty sprawled, too tired to care; it took
> This donnish undersexed conservative
> To start a revolution, and to give
> The Flesh its weapons to defeat the Book.
> When devils drive the reasonable wild,
> They strip their adult century so bare,
> Love must be re-grown from the sensual child:
>
> To doubt becomes a way of definition,
> Even belles lettres legitimate as prayer,
> And laziness a movement of contrition.

Both these poems are very close to Williams. Auden doesn't discuss Montaigne elsewhere; he seems interested in him only as foil to Luther, in Williams' presentation, and obviously doesn't find him especially congenial. The reason, it seems clear, is that he doesn't find him sufficiently existential to be relevant to Auden's deeper concerns. The aspect of Montaigne that appealed to Auden at this particular time is that he offered a precedent and justification for Auden's own doubleness of mind at this period, when he was celebrating the great masters of liberal humanism and teetering on the

[4] I quote the 1976 *Collected Poems* version of "Montaigne," which is slightly revised.

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edge of religious commitment. But Montaigne's influence even at this time was superficial and more apparent than real: Montaigne's doubleness was different from Auden's, and he was not really a model, as a glance at Charles Williams' discussion will show.

Williams is extremely good on Montaigne and the "quality of disbelief," which is necessary to counter Luther's contrition and faith: "Our Lord the Spirit, having permitted contrition to exist, permitted sheer intelligence to exist; he inspired—one may say so—Montaigne." He has cited Lorenzo Valla, who satisfied the Inquisition by saying "that he believed all that Holy Church believed. He added, with the accuracy of a scholar, that She did not know; She believed, and, with her, he." Williams comments that his answer comes straight from the Creed, covers everything, "Yet undoubtedly it also involves as much disbelief as possible; it allows for, it encourages, the sense of agnosticism and the possibility of error." Montaigne said "Most of the grounds of the world's troubles are matters of grammar" (this is the source of the beginning of Auden's poem) and "The conviction of wisdom is the plague of man. That is why ignorance is so much recommended by our religion, as a fitting element of faith and obedience." Was he being ironic? Yes and no. He proposed a different kind of co-inherence from that of the Egyptian monk who said we must be a double man in becoming our neighbor. Montaigne believed in "the old human *pietas* of religion, the religion of custom, of good tradition, 'of my king and my nurse.' " He had a serenity and courtesy not unlike St. Francis. But his poise and ambiguity were later reduced to irony. Pascal subverts him; dislikes his levity as much as his thought; demands that all men should choose.

Williams' view of Montaigne, then, like Auden's, is very different from Starobinski's; they see Montaigne as representing in most respects the very opposite of existentialism and of other characteristically modern attitudes. To begin the attempt to resolve this contradiction, let us look first at Pascal's criticism of Montaigne. Much of Pascal's thought constitutes an explicit—and even more an implicit—reply to Montaigne. His response might be termed one of the two basic or polar types.

Fragment 63 of the *Pensées* announces: "Les défauts de

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Montaigne sont grands," and begins with Montaigne's opinions on suicide and death. After citing many other defects, Pascal returns to this point: "He inspires a nonchalance about salvation, *without fear and without repentance* . . . one cannot excuse his wholly pagan sentiments about death; for one must renounce all piety, if one does not wish at least to die like a Christian: now, he thinks throughout his book only of dying slackly and pleasantly."[5] But in the next fragment Pascal remarks candidly, "It is not in Montaigne, but in myself, that I find everything I see there."[6] This is rather like Gerard Manley Hopkins confessing that he feels himself to be more like Walt Whitman than any man alive, and that this pains him because Whitman is "a very great scoundrel."

Starobinski stresses Montaigne's "skeptical fideism," in contrast to Christian piety: "While the imminence of death incites the Christian to direct his thoughts to the hereafter, Montaigne on the contrary directs his gaze to this world. The threatening absence sends him back to a presence enhanced and made more precious by its very precariousness." "For Montaigne there is no incarnate mediator, nor is there a possibility of ascension through analogy (as traditional theology maintains)." His "skepticism, according to his own avowed intention, is aimed at making man into a 'blank tablet' upon which the finger of God will write what it pleases Him to write."

Montaigne's attitude toward death is in sharp contrast not only to Pascal's, but to the medieval emphasis on the moment of death, as in *Everyman* or the Dance of Death motif, and to much ancient philosophy. The essay on the ancient platitude, "That to Philosophize is to Learn to Die," ends, "Happy the death that leaves no time for all these ceremonious preparations!" (I, 90). " 'A quick death,' said Pliny, 'is the supreme good fortune in human life.' People are loath to acknowledge it." In the penultimate essay, "Of Physiognomy," Montaigne argues that we "need but little learning to live happily," and

[5] "Ses sentiments sur l'homicide voluntaire, sur la mort. Il inspire une nonchalance du salut, *sans crainte et sans repentir*. . . . On peut excuser ses sentiments un peu libres . . .; mais on ne peut excuser ses sentiments tout paiens sur la mort; car il faut renoncer à toute piété, si on ne veut au moins mourir Chrétiennement: or, il ne pense qu'à mourir lachement et mollement partout son livre." (*Pensées*, ed. by L. Brunschvicg, Paris, 1936, p. 66.)

[6] "Ce n'est pas dans Montaigne, mais dans moi, que je trouve tout ce que j'y vois."

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cites Socrates and Seneca as authorities: "Socrates tells us that we have it in us, and instructs us how to find it and make use of it." We do not need to philosophize to learn to die: "Concentrate your thoughts; you will find in yourself the true arguments of Nature against death, and the fittest to serve you in times of necessity. It is they which enable a farm-labourer, and whole nations, to die with as much fortitude as a philosopher" (II, 512). Again, "If we have not known how to live it is wrong to teach us how to die, and to make the end differ from the whole. . . . They may brag as much as they please, that *the whole life of a Philosopher is a meditation on death* (Cicero). But it seems to me that it is, indeed, the end, but not the aim of life. . . . I never met a farm-labourer in my neighbourhood who meditated how, and with what face and assurance, he should spend his last hours. Nature tells him not to think of death until he is dying. And then he will do so with a better grace than Aristotle, whom death oppresses with a double weight, both with itself and with so long a foresight. Therefore it was Caesar's opinion that the happiest and easiest death is the least premeditated."[7]

There is another, perhaps equally important and fundamental, disagreement between Montaigne and Pascal, though I do not recall that Pascal ever mentions Montaigne in this context. Pascal's theme of the three discontinuous orders is eloquently expressed in the *Pensées*: "The infinite distance between body and mind is a type of the infinitely more infinite distance between mind and charity, for charity is supernatural. . . . All bodies, the firmament, the stars, the earth and its kingdoms, are not to be compared with the lowest mind, for mind knows all these, and itself; the bodies know nothing. All bodies together, and all minds together, and all they can effect, are not to be compared with the least motion of charity, for that is of an order infinitely more exalted. All bodies together cannot furnish one spark of thought; it is an impossibility, for thought is of another order. All bodies and minds cannot produce a single motion of true charity; it is an impossibility, for charity is of another, a supernatural order."[8]

[7] I use the translation of the essays by E. J Trechmann (London, 1935), here II, 526. I quote the French text on occasion from the Pléiade edition, ed. by A. Thibaudet and Maurice Rat (Paris, 1962).

[8] "La distance infinie des corps aux esprits figure la distance infiniment plus infinie des esprits à la charité, car elle est surnaturelle. . . . Tous les corps, le firma-

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This theme of metaphysical discontinuity, as restated by T. E. Hulme and then by T. S. Eliot (both making acknowledgement to Pascal), has been a very important one in modern thought, as I have argued in *Dionysus and the City* (1970). But if in this respect Pascal anticipates the moderns, Montaigne emphatically does not. One of his favorite themes is the inseparability of mind and body; far from being in any sense discontinuous, a ghost in a machine (as Descartes was soon to picture them), they constantly interact and influence each other. Somewhat more than a century later, Matthew Prior, the greatest writer of light verse in English, who felt a strong affinity with Montaigne both intellectually and temperamentally and loved his "gay and sociable wisdom" under the patronage of Apollo, wrote a brilliant philosophical poem, *Alma; or, The Progress of the Mind*, in which he comically reconciled Aristotle and Descartes (in a conceit suggested by Montaigne) by describing the progress of the mind upward throughout life, from the child's feet to the adolescent's sexual parts and then the young man's heart, seat of love and ambition, and finally to the head.

> My simple System shall suppose,
> That ALMA enters at the Toes;
> That then She mounts by just Degrees
> Up to the Ancles, Legs, and Knees:
> Next, as the Sap of Life does rise,
> She lends her Vigor to the Thighs:
> And, all these under-Regions past,
> She nestles somewhere near the Waste:
> Gives Pain or Pleasure, Grief or Laughter;
> As We shall show at large hereafter.
> Mature, if not improv'd, by Time
> Up to the Heart She loves to climb:

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ment, les étoiles, la terre et ses royaumes, ne valent pas le moindre des esprits; car il connait tout cela, et soi; et les corps, rien. Tous les corps ensemble, et tous les esprits ensemble, et toutes leurs productions, ne valent pas le moindre mouvement de charitée. Cela est d'un ordre infiniment plus élevé. De tous les corps ensemble, on ne saurait en faire rëussir une petite pensée: cela est impossible, et d'un autre ordre. De tous les corps et esprits, on n'en saurait tirer un mouvement de vraie charité, cela est impossible, et d'un autre ordre, surnaturel." (H. Cairns, ed., *The Limits of Art*, 1948, pp. 771–74.)

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From thence, compell'd by Craft and Age,
She makes the Head her latest Stage.[9]

Thus the mind (Prior is careful not to say soul) is all in all and all in every part, as Aristotle said, and also confined to the brain, where Descartes put it. But Prior's serious point is the same as Montaigne's, that reason is never pure and that excessive confidence in it is a mistake. Prior's Dialogue of the Dead between Montaigne and John Locke represents Montaigne as undermining the "system" of even so modest and sensible a philosopher as Locke. Montaigne says at the end:

> That probably neither Robin, John, Margrate You or I, or any other five Persons alive have either the same Idea's of the same thing, or the same way of Expressing them. The difference of Temperament in the Body, Hot, Cold, Phlegmatic or hasty create as Manifest a Variety in the Operations of our hands and the Conduct of our Lives; and our Conceptions may be as various as our faces, Bodies and Senses, or sensations as you call them. If I like Assafetida I say it has a good Smel, If you cant endure a rose you complain it Stinks. In our Taste, may not I nauseate the Food which You Covet, and is it not even a Proverb that what is Meat to one Man is Poyson to another. If we consider even the Fabric of the Eye and the Rules of Optic, It can hardly be thought we see the same; And yet no Words can express this Diversity. So that there may be as much difference between your Conceptions and mine, as there is between your Band and my Ruff. If so it may happen I say, that if no Mans Ideas be perfectly the same Locks Human Understanding may be fit only for the Meditation of Lock himself. . . .[10]

Montaigne rejects not only discontinuity between mind and body, but that between man and other animals. He attacks the traditional definition of man as the only rational animal on both fronts: animals do show the capacity to reason, he argues, and they have instincts and other faculties that are superior to reason; on the other hand, humans are rarely rational, and never as much as they think they are. Montaigne does not go as far as later "theriophilists" who argued that animals are superior to man and "libertins" who argued that

[9] *The Literary Works of Matthew Prior*, ed. H. B. Wright and M. K. Spears, 1959, I, 477. The image in Montaigne occurs in "De l'yvrongnerie," pp. 326–27 of the Pléiade edition.

[10] Ibid., p. 639.

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they should be our ethical models; his point is merely to moderate man's excessive pride in and reliance on reason, so that he can accept and rely on faith instead. Montaigne's assertion of these continuities is thus, ostensibly at least, in the service of his fideistic approach to religion. But, as we have seen, Pascal felt rather the dangers inherent in Montaigne's ambiguities. Speaking very largely, those moderns who have stressed continuities with the body and with other animals, as in Freud's description of the third or psychoanalytic revolution that followed those of Copernicus and Darwin by revealing that man did not understand or control his own mind, was not master in his own house, have not been friendly to religion. It is the apostles of discontinuity—Pascal, Hulme, Eliot—who have been. But Montaigne has at least as much claim to be "modern" on this issue as they have.

Starobinski suggests also a parallel and contrast with Rousseau, so much of whose thought is a response to Montaigne's. There is a basic contrast on the question of natural goodness, but a parallel on compassion as the central human quality, as well as in concern with pedagogy, autobiography, social customs, and so on. It may be said that these two—Pascal and Rousseau—are archetypes of the polar reactions to Montaigne: humanitarian-revolutionary on the one hand, religious on the other, both tilting the balance Montaigne precariously (but serenely) maintains. (In many ways, the two archetypes are caricatured in the characters Settembrini and Naphta—the ex-revolutionary humanist and the Jesuit-Communist extremist—in Mann's *Magic Mountain*.)

An approach to the question of Montaigne's modernity stressing chiefly the Rousseauist concerns is that of Theodore Spencer (author of the immortal parodies "The Feeble of the Whose" and "How to Criticize a Poem," together with much other valuable criticism) in his Resurrection (not Dialogue) of the Dead, "Montaigne in America."[11] Spencer imagines Montaigne as appearing before a university curriculum committee (including a hostile sociologist) to explain why the *Essays* should be included among today's great books. Unlike Prior, Spencer doesn't attempt to imitate Montaigne's style, but has him speak in dignified contemporary English, suitable to aca-

[11] *Atlantic Monthly*, 1946; reprinted in Spencer's *Selected Essays*, ed. by Alan C. Purves, 1966, pp. 337–47.

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demic surroundings; but the result is still funny and relevant. The central question is how Montaigne's ethics, which advise against ambition and appear to counsel, "Relax," can be relevant to modern American students: "You do your best to debase human nature, you discount the possibilities of greatness in the average human being, you admire . . . the ignorance of the peasant more than the wisdom of the philosopher. . . . I certainly do not think that the slack egoism, the self-satisfied self-contemplation, the lazy and indulgent withdrawal from energy and action, which the essays so temptingly prescribe, should be set as an example before young people whose business is to reconstruct, rather than to undermine, a civilization." Montaigne replies that, though he did not believe in progress and democracy, one could argue that "an attitude to human nature like mine was the attitude toward which progress should lead and which democracy should maintain. I should say that the leisure which I . . . was able in my own time to enjoy should, according to the theory of progress, be enjoyed eventually by all men. I should say . . . that the kind of tolerance which my rank and my income enabled me to cultivate was an example of the kind of tolerance which in the future could be achieved by everyone; and I should say that if you believe in democracy my kind of tolerance must be the aim of all your education, if your democracy is to have any meaning." "My essays offer you and your young men and women one example . . . of a man who tried to live a wise life through self-knowledge, and to reveal his self-knowledge (painfully little of it, I am afraid) to other men. The essays were my offering to my own generation, but I flatter myself that I am no more a provincial in time than I was in space, and the affection with which I once would have embraced a Pole as well as a Frenchman I now extend to you over the gap of three hundred and sixty years." Montaigne cites Pascal and Emerson to prove that his influence was not to make readers passive. But Spencer leaves Montaigne's religion an enigma.

Starobinski, dealing with the relation of private to public life, stresses how Montaigne's inwardness takes on its true value through its relationship with the sphere of public life: "the inner life stands apart, but not without acknowledging that public life must be given its due, and not without awareness

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that its own intimate value can be achieved only through communication and externalization: 'In favor of the Huguenots, who condemn our private and auricular confession, I confess myself in public, religiously and purely.' " "The free mind is not a solitary mind. It is opposed to the world and yet it lives in the world. It is opposed to itself and yet it 'broods over [its] thoughts.' " The individual "comes into possession of himself only through the image of himself reflected by others—all others. He must first be friend and citizen . . . before he can belong to himself. . . ."

There are, of course, no modern equivalents of Montaigne. The closest in some respects are those reflective essayists who also are scientists, like Lewis Thomas, Loren Eiseley, Steven Jay Gould; but humorists like Russell Baker, or older humorists like Thurber and Benchley, are closer in others. As in so many ways, what Montaigne held together in balance is for us separate and specialized.

What is it that makes Montaigne important to us? To look to him only for agreement, for confirmation of what we already believe, is to eliminate the possibility of learning anything. The question is not whether he is "modern"—it is obviously foolish to assume that only that is valuable which is like us—nor even whether he deals significantly with issues that centrally concern us. We look for an attitude and personality more than for specific ideas. What do we find most valuable?

Most striking, first and last, are his candor and honesty. Montaigne renounces definitively the whole notion of the study and imitation of models and historical examples of heroism and proper behavior; instead, he devotes himself to the study of himself. (This is sometimes cited as a part of his progress from Stoicism to Pyrrhonism, though it is more simply a gradual change of attitude, since Montaigne was never a doctrinaire adherent of either philosophy.) "I regard myself as a very ordinary person, except in this respect, that I do regard myself in that light. I plead guilty to the meanest and commonest defects; I neither disclaim nor excuse them. The only value that I set upon myself is that I know my own value."[12] He is "a little below the middle height," a serious defect; is old, being long past forty; can't write poetry, is no good at music, has no physical or mental skills, writes illegi-

[12] II, 84 ("Of Presumption").

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bly; is "extremely idle, extremely independent" (II, 92). He has a bad memory, a slow mind (II, 102). So he is not setting himself up as example, like a public statue, but "intended for a nook in the library, and to entertain a neighbour, a kinsman, a friend, who may take a pleasure in renewing his acquaintance and intimacy with me by means of this portrait" (II, 115). He is indolent: "I am content to enjoy the world, without busying myself with it; to live no more than an excusable life, a life that will be no burden to myself or others" (II, 417, "Of Vanity"). When he feels the temptation to ambition arising in his soul, "I stiffen myself obstinately to resist it" (II, 462); "I am seldom called upon, and as seldom do I offer myself. Independence and laziness, which are my ruling qualities, are qualities diametrically opposed to that trade." He would like to be cared for and ruled by another, "if I could find somebody." "Know thyself" is the wisest advice, but man can't know himself: "I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself. By use and time one becomes familiar with all things strange; but the more I associate with and know myself the more does my deformity astonish me and the less do I understand myself."[13]

In "Of Repentance," he says "Others form man; I describe him and portray a particular, very ill-made one, who, if I had to fashion him anew, should indeed be very different from what he is. But now it is done" (II, 257). "I speak the truth, not enough to satisfy myself, but as much as I dare to speak"... "In this place let me offer an excuse for what I often repeat, that I seldom repent, and that my conscience is satisfied with itself, not as the conscience of an angel or a horse, but as the conscience of a man.... I do not teach, I relate." Having renounced definitively the intention of inspiring or improving the reader, he is able to avoid the slightest taint of the preacherly or pop-psychological tone that is one of the curses of our own age; nothing could be further from the cheery or folksy little anecdotes of the *Reader's Digest*. As to style, "I love the poetic gait, by leaps and bounds. It is, as Plato says, a light, fleet-footed, divinely inspired art" (II, 464). Plutarch is a good model, with his frolicsome sallies and di-

[13] II, 501 ("Of Cripples"): "Je n'ay veu monstre et miracle au monde plus expres que moy-mesme. On s'apprivoise à toute estrangeté par l'usage et le temps; mais plus je me hante et me connois, plus ma difformite m'estonne, moins je m'entens en moy" (p. 1006).

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gressions, as in the *Daemon of Socrates*. "And the more charming, the more careless and casual they appear to be!" Montaigne jokes about his own "remarkable commentary, which has slipped from me in a torrent of babble" (II, 358, "On Some Lines of Virgil"). He doesn't seek correctness in language, but avoids no expressions that are used in the streets: "those who would oppose grammar to usage are queer people": "Do I not speak like that throughout? Do I not portray myself to the life? Enough. I have done what I intended; all the world will recognize me in my book, and my book in me" (II, 335). "I was about to say that I am out of humour with that kill-joy Reason; and as to those extravagant ambitions, that torment one's life and those superfine opinions, if there is any truth in them, I think it too dearly bought and too inconvenient. I am rather out to champion the cause of vanity even, and asininity, if they bring me any pleasure; and let myself follow my natural inclinations, without examining them too closely" (II, 466). He thinks "avarice rather more pardonable than ambition, and pain more to be shunned than disgrace, and health more desirable than learning, and wealth than nobility" (II, 470, "Of Vanity").

The last two essays, "Of Physiognomy" and "Of Experience," may fairly be regarded as Montaigne's nearest approach to a bottom line, or better—to adapt Starobinski's metaphor—as Montaigne's recapitulation and resolution of the themes he has dealt with throughout. Thus Socrates emerges once more as model, example, pattern—but only because he preaches knowledge of one's own ignorance, with simplicity and nature as guides.

In "Of Physiognomy," Montaigne explores more fully than he has elsewhere the notion of Socrates as model and exemplar. He praises his simplicity and practicality; his bringing "human Wisdom down again from heaven, where she was wasting her time," and restoring her to man (II, 510). "We need but little learning to live happily. And Socrates tells us that we have it in us, and instructs us how to find it and make use of it." Farm laborers "who know neither Aristotle nor Cato, neither example nor precept" perform every day deeds of fortitude and endurance more impressive than those we study in the schools. What a pity that Socrates was so ugly! Usually goodness and beauty go together. But Montaigne is

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unlike Socrates not only in not being ugly, but also in being more self-indulgent and less rigorist: "I have not, like Socrates, by the force of reason, corrected my natural propensities, and have not in the least interfered with my inclinations by art. I let myself go as I have come; I combat nothing" (II, 535).

In the next and final essay, "Of Experience," he returns to the point: "I study myself more than any other subject; that is my Metaphysics, that is my Physics"; he allows himself "to be ignorantly and carelessly guided by the general law of the world. . . . The goodness and capability of our Pilot must relieve us fully and absolutely from all anxiety about steering." "I would rather know myself well by studying myself than Cicero. . . . The life of Caesar can offer us no more examples than our own" (II, 550). Returning to the question of models and examples, Montaigne humorously states his refusal to play the role: "In fine, all this farrago that I am scribbling here is nothing but a record of the experiences of my life, which, in regard to spiritual health, is exemplary enough if the instruction to be derived from it is reversed. But in regard to bodily health no man can furnish more useful experience than I. . . ."[14]

Though Montaigne has undermined and renounced the whole notion of models, patterns, heroes, examples for imitation, there is an unignorable implicit contrast with the religious injunction to imitate Christ. Farm laborers and animals, following nature, are better models than are philosophers. Plutarch is more useful than Seneca, but neither is really necessary; nor is Socrates.

"Know thyself" is the wisest injunction, though difficult to follow, and impossible to carry out fully; but one may know enough to use his weaknesses. "I, who make no other profession, find in myself such infinite variety and depth, that the only result of my learning is that I feel how much I still have to learn. I owe it to my weakness, which I so often admit, that I am inclined to be modest, to bow to the beliefs that I have been taught, to be consistently cool and moderate in my opin-

[14] II, 556. "En fin, toute cette fricassée que je barbouille icy n'est qu'un registre des essais de ma vie, qui est, pour l'interne santé, exemplaire assez, à prendre l'instruction à contrepoil. Main quant à la santée corporelle, personne ne peut fournir d'experience plus utile que moy . . ." (p. 1056).

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ions, to hate that overbearing and quarrelsome arrogance that causes a man to believe and trust entirely to himself; a deadly enemy of learning and truth."[15]

Lionel Trilling, in his book on Matthew Arnold, desiderated for our own time, in the phrase Arnold took from Montaigne, a mind "supple et ondoyante." Virginia Woolf, in her beautifully written essay in *The Common Reader*, suggests that his self-portrait becomes a mirror for us, and an enigma: "As the centuries go by, there is always a crowd before that picture, gazing into its depths, seeing their own faces reflected in it, seeing more the longer they look, never being able to say quite what it is that they see." The pen "is always making ordinary men into prophets, and changing the natural stumbling trip of human speech into the solemn and stately march of pens. It is for this reason that Montaigne stands out from the legions of the dead with such irrepressible vivacity. We can never doubt for an instant that his book was himself. He refused to teach; he refused to preach; he kept on saying that he was just like other people. All his effort was to write himself down, to communicate, to tell the truth, and that is a 'rugged road, more than it seems.' " What does he advise us to do? "It is impossible to extract a plain answer from that subtle, half smiling, half melancholy man, with the heavy-lidded eyes and the dreamy, quizzical expression." He refuses to teach: "Je n'enseigne poinct; je raconte." But if he has an essential theme, it is that we must communicate with our fellow humans: "We must dread any eccentricity or refinement which cuts us off from our fellow-beings. Blessed are those who chat easily with their neighbours about their sport or their buildings or their quarrels, and honestly enjoy the talk of carpenters and gardeners. To communicate is our chief business; society and friendship our chief delights; and reading, not to acquire knowledge, not to earn a living, but to extend our intercourse beyond our own time and province."

[15] II, 552, "Moy qui ne faicts autre profession, y trouve une profondeur et variété si infinie, que mon apprentissage n'a autre fruict que de me faire sentire combien il me reste à apprendre. A ma foiblesse si souvant recogneue je doubts l'inclination que j'ay à la modestie, à l'obeyssance des creances qui me sont prscrites, à une constante froideur et moderation d'opinions, et la hayne a cette arrogance importune et quereleuse, se croyant et fiant toute à soy, ennemye capitale de discipline et de verité" (p. 1052).

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The challenge Montaigne lays down for us is that we comment on him with an honesty and candor approaching his own. So once more, and for the last time, in what sense is Montaigne our contemporary? (For better or worse.) His sceptical and fideist approach to religion, though certainly not without its dangers, seems to me still viable and attractive. Scepticism of the power and value of reason, for him, obviously involves no corresponding exaltation of scientific method; nor, on the other hand, does it have a hidden political basis: his belief is genuine, not based on the conviction that religion is necessary to preserve political order by keeping the masses terrified or stupefied. His warnings against the dangers of excessive ambition and of self-righteousness are still healthy and relevant. Though his occasional touches of primitivism—his exaltation of Nature, his tendency to picture the Brazilian cannibals and other New World inhabitants as Utopian, and his backward glances at a Golden Age—are not likely to appeal to us, they are useful as counteractives against the assumption of progress which still underlies our fears of catastrophe.

The final question is, of course, who are *we* and what do we know? and Montaigne can help us as we begin the long and complicated struggle to find answers. Once he has firmly disclaimed the intention of citing himself (or anyone else) as model, heroic or inspirational, he can present himself as friend, sociable describer of the weaknesses of our common humanity. In comparison with, for example, Kierkegaard or Kafka, who make us dreadfully aware of our essential solitude and our terrible responsibility, he makes us feel that we are not alone and that our responsibilities are, thank God, limited. He can thus provide companionship for us in this process of self-definition and thereby console and encourage us. Though in a sense these ultimate questions must always be confronted at last alone, Montaigne, since as a great artist he gives us a powerful sense of his immediate presence and of his own lifelong dealings with these questions, can free us from much of our sense of isolation and loneliness. For in contrast to Descartes, whose meditations are dramatic enough, with their histrionic initial gesture of total scepticism, but then show us the mind in action as a ghost in a machine,

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Montaigne gives us the whole man with his unique history, in which the reasoning mind plays a relatively small part. The body is at least as important as the mind to which it is indissolubly united; both are formed and largely determined by their relation to a particular time and place, by what is inherited from parents and from the past more generally, by the particular context of history.

Reading Montaigne, then, can absolve us from some of our dreadful freedom and diminish the isolation, the weight of responsibility for defining and making ourselves that the existentialists, for example, have so heavily emphasized. If we must accept the Absurd, we can do so without any histrionic suicide of Reason and without giving up moderation and common sense. For Montaigne, conscious choice is not all that important: our bodies, our genes, our traditions and institutions, all enable us often to do better than we know—with luck, as Montaigne always adds. His is a "gay and sociable wisdom," not solitary, in which we try to be fully human, but not more than human, remembering that "sitting on the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting on our behind."[16]

[16] "Et au plus eslevé throne du monde, si ne sommes assis que sus nostre cul" (p. 1096).

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RICHMOND LATTIMORE

Five Last Poems

Salisbury Plain

Lays it all out, not big but into huge
distance, as away from the preposterous great stones
to edgescapes, a bewilderment of dead men's
barrows,

long, round: a magical ground teeming with mana,
shrugging off to the leggy White Horse that
sprawls way up
north, Alfred's Ethandune, and contracting down

to the lyrical river, with dimpled English children,
all the way
to where the steeple goes pointing up like a
mediaeval
countess' hat. Lovely stuff, yes, lovely, and full

of death, from the druidic blood-sacrificers, those
barrow-makers,
to the military which grips this territory, and
keeps surveillance
in planes buzzing the landscape, hovering, like kites,

or like those bloated flies who haunted mur-
derous Argos.

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Near Dorchester

A pair. Round, smooth on the slope, then bristle
on top with their dark green groves. Wittenham
clumps
standing in your view for miles as you wheel

the landscape. Must be climbed from Dorchester. Up
there
the seen-from-far sees far, Didcot, and fifteen
miles away on the spine of the giant

Ridge Way the little spinney we walked through on
another
occasion. All-seen, sees-all. But each little summit
wood has its own druidical secrecies.

Nothing like them. Man-made? God-made? Made
for some purpose.

Our Hotel

Think of coming into Milan station, late
at night (it always is) from Munich or Pescara,
bag-drag the platform and turn right for the
stairs,

all in the same huge proportion; right again,
under the sycamores.
You have the big plain box of a building.
The unpretentious
front door may be locked. But ring. Some one
will come rubbing

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his eyes, and take you in. There's a wobbly lift.
Ceilings
are high, bathrooms long narrow and mean.
Never mind. It's a place to sleep, and descend
to the little

bar with scant place to sit down, full of postmen
and porters
making the morning cheerful after the anxious
night when the train ran hours late from
Pescara or Munich.

Sardinia Remembered

Lapsed stone fences, anemone and asphodel,
warblers:
those round blind towers, nuraghe, built for who
knows
what purpose? Steep-sided streets bannered with
laundry.

Hillsides wind-starved into white hollows of rock,
unexcavated
scoops of tombs. Here and there one chapel
made when the church itself was young. Food basics

brightened betimes by lobster and superb dry white.
Sightless past. Sicily is bilious with history,
Sardinia
runs thin. One striped Pisan church housing
gypsy squatters.

And they'd as soon knife you or hold you for
ransom, sending

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a finger at a time; so they told us
innocent middle-aged Americans wandering their
hinterlands

seeing only pretty girls, angelic children.

Alula or Somewhere

On the hot blue and gold line
maybe a few yards of shelter and anchorage. Make it
suffice
to be a name on the map, align
a jetty or two. String nets. Wise

enough to survive and gaze
into that endless water, where the big tankers carry
through
the world's slippery life blood, days on days,
to other ports bigger than you.

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AVA LEAVELL HAYMON

Verdict

I

The wagon pulls up, its iron-rimmed
oak wheels, gritty from ice melt,
split through gravel with the pop
of teeth hitting buckshot—
it couldn't have happened many times
but it always seemed to be the same:
I felt a high silent whine mount
with the late morning heat, I breathed
danger in the dust and horses' sweat,
that alien cold background smell of salt sea
seeping from the lumpy brown gunny sack
lying in state on the melting ice.

The table for shucking oysters was set up
under the Possum Oak that shaded the kitchen.
Company was already on its way.
A black pot sat inside on the Chambers stove, waiting.
We'd churned butter the day before, pulled onions.
Fresh milk cooled in a feverish blue crock.
Nutmeg, grated, filled like opium a small silver spoon.

(I never saw my grandmother come outside
but she was always there in time,
radiating the business-like faint impatience
a good priest uses to propel the liturgy.)
Snaggle-tooth Calvin jimmied a dripping shell, gouging
at the hinge as though he had to relearn the art.
He held the open half out to her,

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rolling his eyes away, outside the patch of shade.
The rudely exposed oyster swam in a dimming nacre,
the unformed palm of an embryo
—more phlegm than flesh.

She put the transparent thing in her mouth.
The sun stopped in its painful crawl across the sky
and the edges of everything grew hard
dusty sumac leaves hung motionless
the horses' tails were not seen to flick.
Once I had to close my eyes.

Then she nodded
and went back inside,
the screen door shrieking open
and banging twice at her heels.
Relief leaked over us all:
the sun let out its breath, resumed its importance
and its path down the scalded sky.
"They still alive," Calvin would say
to no one in particular
or maybe to my slack face,
and he and my uncle would shake out
half the nasty sack of heavy, wet shells
—barnacled and hideous as frogs—
onto the soft cypress boards, and commence
to prise them open with their stubby knives.

II

True to ceremony, when I make oyster stew
the company's already invited.
"When did you shuck these oysters, Mr. Benoit?"
I ask at the fish market. Clouds of red pepper
and oil of cloves make me want to sneeze.
Aristile Benoit boils crawfish for you
if you call ahead.

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We're on friendly terms, but his answer
would be the same the day of a hurricane.

Once I heard my uncle's wife ask for her recipe.
"What's your secret?" was what my aunt said, prissy,
dabbing her upper lip with the white dinner napkin.
My grandmother answered down the long table:
"You want them to die in the hot milk"
(I thought of my baby sister
nursing endlessly in the back rooms).

And to know for sure, she ate the first one raw.
Ate it with the concentration of a wine merchant.
The fortunes of the chateau rode on her verdict.
I never saw her come outside, but she was
always suddenly there when it was time.
It slipped up on me every time—
the sequence of the liturgy
washing over me helpless, that dry
relentless force that drives a Bach organ fugue.

There she was, holding it in her mouth,
waiting for—what?
No words—the sun snagged at its zenith.
She made a pert shaman's nod
turned to go back inside the screen door
and the afternoon relaxed and continued.

When I make oyster stew,
I know better than to boil the milk.
I give Mr. Benoit's oysters a good sniff
before I dump them in the measured broth.
But I shrug—the company's already on its way.

How could she tell
when an oyster ceases to be alive
and begins to be dead?
Oh, the extremes I can understand:
humming along with the music of the spheres

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chockablock with its siblings
in the shoals of the Gulf, or
stinking to high heaven the way only shellfish can.

But in between.
Exactly as the shell is broached
(which, I read later, is a mortal wound,
although death is not immediate).
What did she know that I don't?
the brackish juices running along her teeth,
lines of concentration around her glazed eyes,
the purse string of her mouth pulled tight.
The shaman's journey
trailing the soul of animal or ancestor
into realms that can't be seen
or measured with clocks or suns.

III

Failing her nod, I suppose
we'd have hung there around the makeshift table
by the bole of the oak tree
and slowly browned into an old photograph
forgotten in a drawer that sticks during winter rains.
The edges begin to layer like a gimpy fingernail
till the picture at last crumbles into fragments
that make no sense at all:
my cowlicked head and Calvin's legs on one piece;
another showing my grandmother's apron,
the open gunny sack and what's left of the ice;
on another, half her floating hair and her forehead
tensed in attention, the cotton fields
stretching out forever behind us,
and the wagon just about out of sight.
The horizon, a character in its own right,
rising out of the distance
on the bright heat outside the shade,

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would have skirled off in the endless way
it always threatened to,
taking its corner of the photograph with it.
And that would be it.
The whole show would be over.
No one later would know we were ever there
or wonder what had become of us.
The drawer's mouldered contents would be dumped out
when the house was sold
and the story would not go on.

But somehow the shaman returned with a verdict,
and with her nod the great machinery of the afternoon
clanked to life again
like the kitchen in the castle of Sleeping Beauty
and time nudged forward,
the danger was past,
the little girl with the uneven curls
grew up, the tree had to be cut down,
and all the adults in the picture died.

IV

Whenever I let Mr. Benoit lie to me
in the fishmarket,
the old brown photograph
swims before my eyes.
What did she look for, so long ago,
in the salty primal liquor
that swished in her mouth and along her tongue,
the taste of life or the taste of death?
What sign should I scry?
What archaic gift was this?
that I failed to learn even though I was there.
And how can she inhabit my life
with such pungency in a place she never visited
without bringing that knowledge with her?

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A fine crack scrawls in the surface, spreads,
the photograph breaks apart,
we are all lost.

Then, "Still alive," Calvin says to himself
as much as to me, interpreting the mystery yet
and him dead these 30 years.
What wrath would be called down
if she decided it were not so, and upon whom?
And what courage did she summon?
or what standard invoke?
while we all waited for the shutter's click
and she put the raw ocean thing in her mouth,
pushed at it with her tongue,
and asked the only question there is.

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LAURENCE LIEBERMAN

The Sailworks Cistern

In the restored
brickwork of old Nelson's Dockyard,

no edifice fits its title
plaque: COPPER AND LUMBER STORE, that suite
of five cabins, each named

after an old ship or ancient Greek hero
(AGAMEMNON, BRITANNIA), converted
to living quarters: housekeeping for weeks,

months, or year-round-tenancies
at modest rates. Note ADMIRAL'S
HOUSE, where he'd never lived
(but someplace near), today
a plush museum complex honeycombed
with corridors and passages:

British naval history of the past three hundred years
and thousand-year-old Carib or Arawak Indian
reliquary sandwiched, side by side,

in the same glass-cased cabinets. It's all
one yesterday, *The Past*, shrink or stretch
its date blocks as you will. The old names

emit like fragrance, true savor,
howsoever they stray or wander
from site to site, century
by millennium. . . . We take one
long step down to sub-basement
of three story

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Buccaneer's Inn,
this capacious half-darkened, high-

ceilinged room, so humid
and dank instant mist condenses on our eyelids,
brows. Wide low interior

seems to spread without limit, more warehouse
than workshop; yet this, we're told,
was the hidden "Lead Cellar," where pitch tars

were stored in huge deep vats,
now updated to a modern SAILWORKS
which supplies and repairs
sail for two rival Charter Yacht
businesses, each owned and managed
by noble island families related,

generations back, to the original skippers of British
fleets stationed here (though one Charter Baron,
it's rumored, was descended from pirates). . . .

We grow accustomed, slowly, to the dim lights;
hear rustle and scrape of canvas, or softer
fabrics—linens, silks?—dragged across cold

floors of concrete before we track
swish-swish to its source in a rear
left corner, so small a quadrant
of the old pitch basement revived
and in use . . . . Four women, flouncy-lace
skirted and bonneted,

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lace collar, lace-
pleated long sleeves, colonial style

costumes: they're so engrossed
with bulky textiles, they hardly seem to notice
our approach. Two matronly,

round-faced ladies, propped on high stools,
operate immense sewing machines,
the taller shaped like a giant upright piano.

One seamstress, kicking pedals
and twisting hand levers, performs
so rapidly, she resembles
a soloist concertizing on a Church
Organ; the other woman springs
erect, abandoning her instrument

in midswing to assist her seated partner, who now
pays out the last few meters of long thick canvas
sail; while two younger colleagues

are folding numerous huge sails, scattered here
and there, then stacking them in squarish
heaps near a front door pickup station. Dozens

of sails, in the various phases
of manufacture or repair, are spread
flat on the floor, curled borders
of each removed a little distance
from the next, so much floor space
to spare . . . We step

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close to the team
of folders, their wares simulating

grand mammoth handkerchiefs
or disheveled bed sheets for a Race of Giants
(masters to expert pairs

of dwarf seamstresses); when I notice mists
of the wide hall condense so fast
big droplets are poised to fall from your chin

or ear lobe, adangle, I snap
from my Gulliveresque fantasy to ask
the nearest puff-bonneted
lass about the record-high humidity
of the cellar: "Can it be raining
in here? Soon, I'll need an indoors

umbrella." From her slow smile, flowers her reply:
"This stone floor is a roof to the largest cistern
ever built by the Royal Navy Command,

some three hundred tons of rainwater held, as now,
during peak rainy season. When the tank's
near full, we have to keep wiping soppy discharge

from our brows—this one cistern
supplying the whole dockyards with water
for all faucets and nozzles to last out
year's end." She blooms into her widest
grin: "Don't breathe too fast, or you'll
choke, and drown."

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RICHARD MOORE

The Embrace

I write you poems you are too shallow to understand.
In the gray depths of Victoria Station, the soot, the noise,
you cried my name, and out of the dark crowd—those clots
of mere people—you flew, all light in your light blue
summer dress, all lightness and laughter in my arms,
all air, all daylight, all reason that a man exists.
How you enjoyed your power in those happy days!
Now age weighs us down; now you struggle free.

Go! I have had enough of lightness, fantasies,
the dolls all shattered, daughters broken. Your power fails,
and back you fly, you fade. The station swallows you.
Take it all back, then. Take the TV, take my name,
and let me sit, lost in this dirty gray crowd of thoughts,
writing you poems, too shallow to understand.

The Stunning

Lost in the man, the child
sobs uncontrollably.

Maples outside the window
move in silence. A radio
where the new house hammers
pours out music to the carpenters
from their pickup, its doors flung wide,
abandoned.
What will become of her?
The child weeps. The leaves whine.
The house grows
like money—a future, hearth, harmony . . .

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Traffic moans in the distance.
O, it is all so promising!
What is a promise? Up the street
the street cleaner grinds,
hisses through its giant
nozzles. The filth shall be swept
away.
What will become of us?

In the Sunset

Contrail aglitter still,
still sunlit, where a jet bomber
pricks through blue, while here below
low cloud's gone gray. I know what
it's like to be there—up there—
the dials, switches, the pale fluorescence,
the impersonality of the cockpit.

But now a duck passes
crosswise to the contrail but far
below—below the dark cloud even,
barely above me at all. Yet
there I have never been, nor ever
shall. Still she flies, flies
alone into her night.

Transformation

At the threshold of old age
to find the whole building changed
as a glove pulled inside-out:
to press instep on the high sill,
hearing a sonata of Schubert
muffled within, in the salon—

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then the door is flung open and rock,
rock music in the glare, blares.
Look at them dancing! It's
a brothel. . . . Was it always?

They say now what a lousy
family it was. I thought it
was good, basically. Sure,
the suicide attempts—but no one
succeeded. They're all in college.
That *proves* it was a good family,
doesn't it? Wasn't I gentle,
festive, full of old tunes, rock-
firm in the old house? So I write them:
Stay away from here this Christmas.

Aglow

The dark cloud aglow in the east beyond
the trees . . . the mystery of
it. Winter, hardly begun,
aflame already within itself.

The dull murmur of traffic—
and an airliner, full of people going
somewhere, lost in the same
cloud. The new prosperity . . .

the Empire under the Antonine emperors
flourishing. Was Gibbon the
first to sense it
dead? But here the glow—

the orange glow still, and the wind's
soft wild cry in the pines
above my swaying thoughts
answers—yes, I think, answers.

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J. ALLYN ROSSER

Getting Wise

In the same extreme summer, after walking
smartly away from college
only to learn I was incapable of lying
believably about having waitressed
plenty of times before
in lots of different places,
I took a job at the plastics factory
and had all four wisdom teeth
pulled at once.

Even then I think I knew it for cliché,
the implausible dream of the privileged—
but I had a real desire to feel my own salt
soak into the back of my shirt
all day alongside nonunionized
Puerto Ricans and Vietnamese; like them
to hold my tongue and bow down
to machinery that wouldn't stop;
to refuse the earplugs that didn't help;
to feel and share their powerlessness.
And I felt I *did* feel it, with all
the fierce authority of uttering
one's first profoundly earned "Goddammit!"
slamming those sharp-edged meat trays
into accordions taut enough for boxes.
The heat in there was unholy.
My inner forearms ripped to bleeding.
Of course it didn't matter
how hard I tried, the others always knew
I could walk out when I pleased—
and all their broken speeches mended
just enough to say so. For fun,
the foreman cranked the rollers

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into double-time at my station.
I nearly bit my lip right through
to keep up. It seemed important
to eat those cardboard sandwiches
from the vending machine,
and to keep from coughing
when the plastic fumes were all
we had to breathe.

The joke wore off, my trays slowed down,
and a few of the women began vaguely
to include me in breakroom conversation.
The men lent me change, and displayed
photos of children in glass-beaded braids
and ill-fitting Sunday clothes.
Still they wouldn't smile all the way
or look me right in the eye.
Not until I showed up that Wednesday
after the extractions, grotesquely
swollen with blue-yellow bruises
along my jaw and under my eyes,
would Fatima acknowledge my presence:
"Your boyfriend—he do this?"
Everyone at the table was staring.
"Well," I said, half-whispering,
and then: "He has a terrible temper."
The women nodded. The men shook their heads.
I thought I could live with a lie so small.
But Thursday morning Jojo greeted me
with rice cakes, and Conchita
explained about her husband in California.
Cheng-Liu showed me how to stack boxes
so they'd never fall, and invited me
home to dinner some day soon. I said
I'd come, and really should have
come back for my check the next day.
I needed them to believe something of me,
at least that I needed the money.
Instead I sponged St. Tropez Bronze
over the bruises, coiled my hair

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in a chignon, put on pearls
and long-sleeved silk, walked
into the best restaurant in town
and told the manager yes,
years and years in every kind of place,
you name it: Chinese cuisine, Italian,
French. I smiled right in his face.
I got the job. It was easy.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Shakespeare in New York

JOSEPH PAPP, THE AMAZING NON-PROFIT IMPRESARIO, has begun a project of producing the entire Shakespeare canon over the next six years at his New York Public Shakespeare Festival, with big-name American stars and a solid list of American directors. It is a bold idea, and a good one, a chance to challenge the overwhelming British superiority in Shakespearean production by employing our best talent under the most favorable conditions possible, in a continuing repertory rather than one or two ad hoc productions.

Rivalry between British and American approaches to Shakespeare goes back well into the nineteenth century. An extreme example in 1849 resulted in a riot in Astor Place (where Papp's Public Theater is located today), in which twenty-two people were killed in demonstrations resulting from rival productions of *Macbeth* in New York by the American Edwin Forrest and the Englishman William Macready. Forrest was seen as more robust, honest, and powerful than the effete Macready, an attitude that still lingers among American theatre people today over the relative approaches of the two countries, just as the British, and their admirers, tend to see American actors as crude and ill-spoken. This is ridiculous. There have been plenty of raw British actors of Shakespeare, from Edmond Kean in the early nineteenth century to the more recent Jonathan Pryce or Antony Sher, just as there have been plenty of polished Americans, from Edwin Booth to the Lunts to, today, Meryl Streep or Frank Langella.

When our actors have trouble with Shakespeare, it has nothing to do with the supposedly crude American temper, nor with the nature of American speech. We do tend to speak in more of a monotone than the British, but that problem can be overcome with proper training, while still retaining American pronunciation, which is actually closer to Shakespeare's than are the broad *A* and dropped *R* of our cousins. Instead, American actors, even good ones, typically fail in Shakespeare because of poor training, or the related problem of poor direction. Actor training that stresses "inner truth" runs into trouble with a playwright who, as Shaw put it, cannot be played behind the lines or between the lines, but must always be played *on* the lines. Believe it or not, many of our actors cannot even define blank verse, much less play it, because they have been taught that verse is a mere external that will take care of itself if their emotions are strong and true, which makes about as much

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sense as telling opera singers that the music will take care of itself if they too are full of intense feeling.

The first production in the Shakespeare marathon was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by A. J. Antoon, who has a good record with American naturalism, but whose approach to the classics tends toward the dread, 1960ish "concept" production, as good a way of sabotaging Shakespeare as has ever been invented. Thus, when I read that Antoon was going to set the play in Bahia, a region of northern Brazil, with the tropical jungle as "the ideal substitute for Shakespeare's forest," I yawned, and expected the worst.

In the event, however, Antoon rode his concept lightly, and displayed the kind of attention to detail and sensitive exploration of text that he has in the past with plays by Lanford Wilson or Tina Howe. The fairies lost their supernatural existence; even the word "fairy" was replaced by "spirit," "the man," or "maiden," but note that the substitutions were at least chosen to scan properly. Antoon cast the fairies as blacks, which set them off from the rest of the cast, who were white; the distinction between nature and supernature, so important in Shakespeare, lost some of its punch, but at least there was a noticeable differentiation. The scenery, by Andrew Jackness, and the costumes, by Frank Krenz, were abstract and understated, in contrast to the boringly explicit description of Bahia in the advance publicity and in the program notes; we seemed more to be in the kind of never-never land the play requires than specifically in turn-of-the-century Brazil. In general, the production was balanced, clear, and witty.

Midsummer has three intersecting plots: the two pairs of lovers escaping into the forest; Bottom the weaver and his fellow "mechanicals" staging the play within the play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, in a hilariously amateurish fashion; and the spat between the fairy king and queen, Oberon and Titania, which leads to her being drugged to fall in love with Bottom, who has been given the head of an ass. Oddly enough, in this production the top plot of the young lovers was by far the best. The mechanicals often steal the show; they have the best jokes, and their characterizations are the most vivid. The lovers' scenes are written in a stiff verse, much of which is in self-consciously rhymed couplets, and the jokes based on the shifting love triangles (the changes resulting from the fairy Puck's love potion, as with Titania and Bottom) go on too long. The four actors here, however—Julia Gibson as Hermia, Bruce Norris as Demetrius, Rob Knepper as Lysander, and especially the delightful Elizabeth McGovern as Helena—spoke the verse easily, and found endless comic variation within the basic lines of action.

McGovern is a movie star recognized a few years ago by *Newsweek* as one of a "new breed" of young actors in America. Actors like her, Kevin Kline, or William Hurt are less introspective, and more imaginative and craftsmanlike, than traditional actors of the past four or five decades. One reason is that our best acting conserva-

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tories, at Yale, N.Y.U., or Juilliard (McGovern's alma mater), have broken with the rigidly naturalistic, internalized, anti-literary approach of Lee Strasberg of the Actors' Studio, which dominated actor training in the U.S. from the late 1940s until the seventies. In the Strasberg "Method," the actor plays his own recollected personal emotions, individually or in combinations, and is always testing results against real life. Such acting can be strikingly effective in naturalistic drama, and (especially) in film, but comes out small and timid (despite the stress on emotion) in classical literary plays like Shakespeare's, with their archetypal characters and situations, and verbal exuberance.

Helena's lines to Demetrius in Act II are an example of the kind of problem the naturalistic actor typically finds in Shakespeare:

> I am your spaniel; and Demetrius,
> The more you beat me, I will fawn on you:
> Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me,
> Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,
> Unworthy as I am, to follow you.

Trying to relate this passage to her own personal life, an actress will be disturbed either by its blatantly male chauvinist attitude, or by its dark masochistic undertones; she will therefore underplay it, or perform it as a psychopathological case study. Either way, she won't be funny. McGovern, however, simply flung herself down unhesitatingly around her partner's leg, and he dragged her around the stage like a ball and chain—while the verse flowed on without interruption. McGovern obviously was not worried about whether this action was "truthful," or "honest," whether her emotions were "real," or whether she herself would ever do such a thing. She was being truthful and honest *to the character and the literary situation* rather than to her everyday self, and was thus charming and hilarious.

Lorraine Toussaint as Titania and Carl Lumbly (Detective Petrie on the "Cagney and Lacey" TV show) as Oberon were a handsome pair, but strained and busy in their acting. Lumbly spoke well, but had a way of making a muscular contraction on every other word, which weakened the feeling of authority he should generate (he is, after all, supposed to be a *king*). In general, the fairies (spirits? witch doctors?) were rendered much too gymnastic, a second-rate imitation of Alvin Ailey dancers.

The mechanicals, particularly F. Murray Abraham, a NYSF stalwart, as Bottom, were a tame bunch. Abraham is a relaxed performer with a certain amount of stage charm, but what does an American actor, trained to be "honest," etc., do when playing a character who is a ham? Bottom's compulsions to roar out bombastic verse, and to play a wide range of characterizations (he even wants to do the heroine!), are not things that a bad actor would

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want today, when underplaying rather than overplaying is the more common sin, and character acting is widely despised. Abraham rattled off "The raging rocks / With shivering shocks," etc., as if he had never heard of alliteration, and when he tried out as "Thisne" (Bottom's mispronunciation of Thisbe), he tossed the lines off quickly, as if embarrassed to be playing the opposite sex. Applying naturalistic preconceptions to Shakespeare is a sure road to failure, especially when, as often occurs, the actor must play a role within the role.

Stuart Vaughan directed the second play in the series, *Julius Caesar*. Artistic Director of the NYSF for its first four seasons back in the late fifties, Vaughan was the major reason for its success, with productions still remembered today for their clarity, integrity, and vigor. His delightful production of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* last summer in the park (also with Elizabeth McGovern) was his first in New York City in seventeen years, however; like some other outstanding directors, he worked in regional and university theatres in the interim, when, alas, New York could well have used him.

Joseph Papp managed to cast *Julius Caesar* as the ultimate star vehicle, with Al Pacino as Marc Antony, Martin Sheen as Brutus, and Edward Herrmann as Cassius. One can well imagine the problems such a glittery group might provide in rehearsal, but in fact Vaughan was able to turn out a well-balanced, strong, intelligent ensemble piece, with the actors serving Shakespeare rather than themselves.

The same could be said of the good designs. Bob Shaw's set extended the brick walls of the Public's Newman Theater, a proscenium house, into brick pillars and walls on stage, with a marble floor, and marble capitals and bases on the pillars. The stage was thus well articulated into numerous acting areas, yet also provided just the right austere feeling for the late Roman Republic (or Shakespeare's version of it—whenever Shakespeare depicts ancient Rome, it is always a harsh, puritanical place). Lindsay W. Davis' authentic Roman costumes enhanced this feeling, although the togas worn in the early scenes were a problem for some of the actors—as they used to be for the Romans themselves. Hard to drape properly and notoriously difficult to wear for very long, they were used only on formal occasions, which would include the Feast of Lupercal where the play starts, but would probably not include times when you were running around conspiring. Best designed of all was Arden Fingerhut's artistic lighting, which varied from harsh boldness during the funeral oration or battles to moody atmosphere in the emotionally intimate interior scenes.

Pacino played Antony as shrewd, tough, and politic. (Comparisons with *The Godfather* will be inevitable, so I shall try to avoid them.) He spoke the verse thoughtfully, with full understanding of its meaning (by no means common in American Shakespeare productions) and shape, particularly in the "Friends, Romans, Country-

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men" scene, where he worked the crowd beautifully, playing all the ups and downs and double-entendres with ease. But, alas, the actor has no voice for playing tragedy on stage; weak, raspy, lacking in resonance and tonal variation, the effect was like hearing a virtuoso on a toy violin, sometimes interesting for its very unusualness and harshness, but always terribly limited.

Martin Sheen was the weakest of the three principals; he spoke the verse "correctly," but in a detached, gingerly fashion, as if tiptoeing through a minefield. He seemed very stiff in the early parts of the play, rushing transitions and not always listening to his fellow actors, but improved noticeably later on, particularly in the battle scenes. I thought it odd that he should seem so intimidated by the verse, since he has always seemed a verbal actor, with a good voice, and an ear for accents, which is usually a helpful sign for any role that requires a "sound." He has played Shakespeare before, but in gimmicked versions, including a Puerto Rican Hamlet for Papp in the sixties. Perhaps that experience scarred him.

Edward Herrmann, less well known than Pacino or Sheen, but an excellent actor, made a tall, gangling, "lean and hungry" Cassius. Bitter, envious, selfish, the character is the opposite of the intellectual and virtuous Brutus. It's a thankless role, but very important to the overall shape of the play. Most star actors would have been tempted to make the character at least partly attractive, but Herrmann admirably played him as the nasty creation that he is. American actors, again, are trained always to give psychologized, "well-rounded" performances, showing us the good side of the bad characters and the bad side of the good, but Shakespeare is often more interested in the well-rounded play than in the well-rounded character.

The entire production could be described as a well-rounded play. The supporting cast was superb. Vaughan handled the crowds gracefully, with good picturization and choral effects, and every single minor character was well-spoken. Two of the secondary performers were marvelous: Joan MacIntosh as Portia and John McMartin as Caesar. Portia is one of the many wonderful small roles for women in Shakespeare's plays (he can write rounded parts when he wants to, even in miniature), strong, sensual, loving, and stoically Roman; the detail of her wounding herself in the thigh resonates on many levels of meaning. MacIntosh, an outstanding classical actress who unfortunately wasted much of her youth in avant-garde nugacity, brought all the aspects of the role to life with charm, dignity, and (especially) her rich, clear voice. And McMartin's definitive performance made you realize why the play is named after Caesar despite his dying early; acerbic, pompous, sometimes keen-witted and sometimes insensitive, sometimes foolish yet always giving a sense of command, he is in fact the most "rounded" character in the play, and McMartin played all his contradictions so skillfully and vividly that when Brutus cried at the

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end, "O Julius Caesar, though art mighty yet! / Thy spirit walks abroad," we could well believe him.

Peter Brook is a director I dislike in principle, but can't help liking in practice. His personal mystique, his heavy-handed treatment of scripts, his anti-literary bias, are all too common traits in theatre today (particularly in America and continental Europe, though Brook himself is British), and are responsible for much that is wrong with it. When the director becomes the star, the actors usually dwindle into puppets, the script is rendered crude and vulgar, and the performance itself is a boring display of scenic gimmickry.

The difference between Brook and his imitators and fellow travelers, however, is in his greater intelligence and talent, and his true devotion to his art. His personal glamour is largely thrust upon him; he lives simply, and performs in out-of-the-way theatres, when he could easily earn big money and fame by directing flashy British shows, as Peter Hall and Trevor Nunn have done with *Amadeus*, *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, etc. But Brook's big successes, like his *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Carmen*, were not promoted in so shameless a way; they had limited runs and earned him relatively little.

Last fall, Brook took on a season at the renovated Majestic Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. His first production, *The Mahabharata*, a nine-hour Performance Art piece based on Hindu scripture, was reviewed here in the Spring issue by Marcia B. Siegel. His second production, more modest (thank heaven!), was a production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, with an international cast.

The renovation of the Majestic involved only putting it into working order; the decor was left in its decrepit state. A large, "majestic" house indeed, this theatre with its scarred walls and huge, elegant proscenium arch, its decayed ceilings and chipped terrazzo floors, reminded me of Pompeii. Brook imaginatively used the theatre itself as a metaphor for the Ranevsky estate, enhancing it only with old Oriental rugs on the floor, plus a few set pieces and some screens. The acting space was enormous, stretching from the large bare stage itself into the former orchestra, and making good use of the former boxes.

An example of Brook's directorial craftsmanship was in the way he and his designer, Chloë Obolensky, created a functional space despite its stark vastness. In the opening act, for example, he used only a single armchair in the front of the proscenium, plus another smaller one behind, plus the famous bookcase that Gaev addresses in Act I, and a single screen, yet there were in fact eight acting areas on the forestage alone. (An acting area is defined as a place where an actor can sit, or, more precisely, as a place that will logically draw and hold a character. These form the poles around which blocking revolves; when there are too few, as is often the case, the groupings and action will seem unfocussed and the locales unclear.) Many of these were low—two cushions piled up, or a small platform. Staircases leading to the boxes were themselves turned

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into acting areas. Brook's blocking was thus varied and meaningful, despite the large number of characters involved and numerous lines of action, often occurring simultaneously.

Brook himself assembled the large, cosmopolitan cast, whose acting varied from brilliant to merely adequate. Despite their disparate backgrounds, and a wide range of accents—Swedish, British, Russian, Yiddish, and various American ones—there was a good sense of an ensemble. In particular, Natasha Parry (born in London, with an extensive acting career there) and Erland Josephson (one of Sweden's foremost actors, known to us from a dozen Bergman films) sounded as unlike as possible as Lyubov and Gaev, yet, because of their fine acting, and the overall abstract nature of the production, we had no difficulty in accepting them as brother and sister. Kate Mailer, overenunciating and busy as Dunyasha, and Rebecca Miller, too big and too bland as Anya, gave the weakest performances—did Brook cast them solely because their fathers are famous?—but even they seemed well integrated into the cast. The others, however, were all of an international standard, especially tiny Linda Hunt as the German governess, Charlotta (though I have seen her magic tricks done better), and David Pierce as the pretentious upstart valet, Yasha.

The most striking performance was by Brian Dennehy as Lopakhin, the former peasant boy who ends up buying the estate. I had seen Dennehy in films, and never thought of him as anything but a large, amiable, naturalistic American actor, good in supporting roles in movies like *Semi-Tough* or *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. A bearlike man, with a small, notably Irish face, and a bland American accent, he would not have been my first choice for any classic role, and apparently wasn't Brook's either; he practically forced himself on the director, and had to audition repeatedly to get the part of Lopakhin. I am delighted that he did! Energetic yet precise, rich in detail and amazingly varied in emotional coloring, his performance was resplendent. Lopakhin's speech in the third act, when he returns to the estate after having bought it at auction, drunk and triumphant, was the high point in the play. Brook, as always, staged it skillfully. For this act, where there is a party going on, he placed three red velvet screens halfway back; we could see fragmentary pictures of the dancers between and around the screens throughout the action. The rest of the setting consisted only of three straight-backed, needlepoint-seated chairs. Dennehy's performance of the speech had so many emotional facets that it is hard to recount them all—the drunkenness, the triumph, his contempt for Lyubov shifting back and forth with his awe of her, his shame at his humble background and pride for what he has become combined with fear that he will never be more than a peasant in people's minds, including his own, all gracefully and powerfully combined in a speech lasting only a few minutes. All this was underscored by the blocking, as he moved about the stage, sometimes lumbering, sometimes

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dancing lightly in the way that some heavy men can, once prostrate on the floor, and finally staggering back and knocking over one of the screens, demonstrating his and Brook's astute sense of visual metaphor. Bravo!

Dublin's Abbey Theatre may be the worst major theatre company in the world. Founded in 1904 by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, it has a glorious dramatic tradition, having introduced not only their plays but those of Synge and O'Casey, plus many lesser but nonetheless talented playwrights. As James W. Flannery has shown in his book, *W.B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre*, Yeats himself was a good director, with important theories on staging. Moreover, the Abbey has been known for a number of its major actors who became international stars, including Barry Fitzgerald, Siobhan McKenna, and Cyril Cusack.

With the passing decades, however, the Abbey has declined into senility. The famous Abbey style of acting, as Flannery noted in a *New York Times* article, now "mainly consists of a set of personal mannerisms that, in the name of naturalism, substitute for the skills one would expect of trained professionals." Yeats's anti-naturalistic theories have been forgotten, and attempts at innovation are severely limited by the resistance of older actors.

Nonetheless, changes have finally occurred. Young actors have trained abroad, and returned to challenge their complacent elders. In December 1986, a new artistic director was appointed, Vincent Dowling, who was dedicated to expanding the repertory, and developing a more international, visual style of theatre. At the end of March, we had a chance to see some of the results; the Abbey returned to Manhattan for the first time in fifty years with, of all things, a Performance Art piece, entitled *The Great Hunger*. I saw it on St. Patrick's Day, at the Triplex, a lovely new theatre complex in the otherwise sterile environs of Manhattan Community College in Tribeca.

Rumors have it that, in out-of-town tryouts, Irish-American audiences, expecting a historical play about the potato famine, walked out in fury when *The Great Hunger* turned out to be an abstract piece about sexual and spiritual hunger in contemporary Ireland. My own expectations were different. Knowing something about Yeats's drama, and reading in the advance publicity that the play is based on a poem by Patrick Kavanagh, I assumed that the performance would be stylized, lyrical, philosophical, intense, witty, tragic. I had not heard of Kavanagh, whose poem was written in the forties and who died in 1967, but since the term "Irish poet" is practically redundant, I also expected dialogue of some distinction—possibly difficult or even obscure, perhaps overly clever or subjective, but certainly *verbal*.

How wrong I was. From the moment that the leading man, Tom Hickey (touted as Ireland's best actor!), came onstage at the beginning, grunting endlessly and flapping his arms, I knew I was in for

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a rough night. The pretentious setting didn't help either: a tabernacle, a rustic gate, and, believe it or not, an earth-mother statue, each carrying a ton of portent. The floor was covered with—what else?—potatoes. Costumes consisted of shabby vests and wool caps on the men, cheap cotton dresses on the women, plus rich vestments on a bishop; they would be denounced as crude Irish stereotypes if Hollywood did them that way, but were supposed to be aesthetic here. Actors whined, groaned, and occasionally spoke audibly. After about a half hour of this torture, I began to copy down the "dialogue" as it was spoken, as a way of passing the time; since it was intermittent, it was easy to keep up, but not necessarily easy to comprehend. Here it is, as recorded between 8:34 and 8:53 P.M.:

> "Your children will miss you when you're gone."
> "What?"
> Something, something, "What?" Something, something, "on ice [?]"
> Rumble, rumble, "the likes of you, hrm, hrmm, this parish."
> "Is that a ghost?"
> "Then the rockety pah!"
> "A wonderful night we had."
> Something, something, something.
> "Woo, woo, wow," etc., repeated many times.
> "The hutscha [?]" repeated three times.
> "The ratifia, raba, she ought to hrmm, mmmm, rmmm, finish it, rmmm, hrmmm, gurgle, trounce, hrrm, backing, mmm, backing, you have all the luck hrmmm, hrrrm, the cat, hrrm," etc.
> Long silence, breast beating.

Patrick Kavanagh fans, if there are any, will probably be moved to sue, but remember: I'm just the messenger. Blame the perpetrators.

With *The Great Hunger*, the Abbey have apparently jumped from insipid naturalism to muddle-headed avant-garde, with nothing in between. One of the problems with Performance Art is that it requires far more craft on the part of its performers than does traditional, literary drama. When the actors are as tense and mannered as they were here, and have harsh, strained voices with slovenly diction to boot, there is not even a literary text to fall back on, only a series of amateurish, heavy-handed images. While they were in New York, I hope that the troupe went to see the work of our better avant-garde directors such as Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, Martha Clarke, and Ping Chong, or, better still, Peter Brook's season over in Brooklyn, to learn how carefully and skillfully this kind of theatre has to be done to be any good.

It is against my principles to leave a show at intermission, especially when I am reviewing it, but, caught up in a crowd of fleeing audience members, I found myself out in the street, dazedly heading for the subway. Perhaps I'll try the Abbey again, in another fifty years.

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BERT CARDULLO

Three Ways to Play House

House of Games and *Housekeeping* are two recent films so different in their reflections of and responses to American life that, seen back to back (as I saw them), each tells us something about the other, each sets the other in relief. The subject of the first film is the title of its main character's best-selling book, *Driven: Obsession and Compulsion in Everyday Life*; and to the extent that deceit serves us in our compulsion to succeed, as it does the con artist Mike, it is an ancillary subject of *House of Games*. The subject of *Housekeeping* is captured in these words of Lucille's about her sister, Ruth: "Practical things don't matter to her. She hasn't figured out what matters to her yet." Ruth and her aunt Sylvie aren't driven by the desire to succeed, to make something of themselves in the eyes of the world; appearances mean nothing to them. Life for them is meant to be *lived*, to be experienced, not to be succeeded at, and living for them means living in the natural world of lakes, mountains, and forests. Jobs, school, money, and routine, even the routine of housekeeping, only get in their way, so itinerancy becomes the answer—itinerancy that takes them out into the world, into the American vastness. The characters of *House of Games*, by contrast, are creatures of the city, which exists to serve and fuel their obsessions; they don't so much live in it as on it, they don't so much experience it as utilize it. They are increasingly the norm in our country today, where there are obviously even fewer wide open spaces than in the mid-1950s, when *Housekeeping* takes place, and where there is even less tolerance for the life lived simply in wonder of living, of being in the world.

Margaret Ford is the author of *Driven* and a psychoanalyst in a large (unnamed) American city; she is a "workaholic"—an obsessive-compulsive personality herself—and is warned to slow down by an older woman, a friend of hers who teaches at the institute where Margaret practices. But she can't slow down: she'll play, but only if she can combine play with work. Mike, a con man and professional gambler whose hangout is the "House of Games," gives her the opportunity to do both. Margaret met him through one of her patients, a compulsive gambler whose marker Mike held, and Mike nearly conned her out of $6,000 during their first meeting. He is also obsessed with work—with conning anyone, at any time, out of a buck—and his work piques Margaret's interest. She'll play as his social and sexual companion, and she'll work as a student of his methods in preparation for a new book on the confidence game. What

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Margaret doesn't realize is that Mike can't quit conning, even for romance: from the moment they first sleep together, he is on his way to conning her out of $80,000. She thinks that she is studying the methods of a con man, whereas in fact she is ultimately the object of the con. When she discovers this, she shoots Mike to death; then, ironically, she takes the non-working vacation her friend had urged on her. When we last see her, she is calmly and self-satisfiedly returning to her job. Her final act on screen is to steal the gold lighter of a woman sitting at the next table in an exclusive restaurant: Margaret may have killed Mike, but he lives on through her new obsession to steal, to take what she wants, the moment she wants it.

Margaret has become a kind of two-headed monster, with the paradoxical obsessions both to succeed at psychoanalysis and at thievery. Like Mike, she defines herself not through what she *is*, but through what she *does* and what she acquires. This film doesn't probe psychological depths; rather, it depicts the behavioral surfaces of characters obsessed with success, with defining themselves through achievement, be it in the world of psychoanalysis or of conning. Margaret is never with Mike just to *be* with him, and vice versa: each is always in some way using the other, looking past the other to a "higher" goal. Each is a byproduct of modern American capitalist society, from opposite ends of the spectrum: the psychoanalyst who treats the casualties of the system—the compulsive gambler, the serial murderer—and the con man who thrives within the system by alternately capitalizing on people's greed and their trust, their desire to trust in a world gone faithless. Mike and Margaret collide, and the result is his death and her metamorphosis into a hideous caricature of the bitch-goddess Success: someone for whom success means self-aggrandizement of any kind, and for whom too much success is not enough. The inscription Margaret writes for a fan in a copy of her book after Mike's murder glibly justifies her behavior, and may become the glib self-justification of everyone remotely like her in the eighties: "Forgive yourself."

The playwright David Mamet wrote and directed *House of Games*, and it shows. The language is taut and charged; the themes are roughly those of his two best plays to date, *American Buffalo* (1977) and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984); and the main actors are people he's used before in the theater: Lindsay Crouse (his wife) and Joe Mantegna. Why did Mamet write *House of Games* for the screen instead of for the stage? For one obvious reason: to realize the multiple shifts between the analyst's office and the "House of Games," between the "House" and the scenes of swindle, between interiors and the street. And for one not-so-obvious reason: Mamet wanted his film, I believe, to be seen as a kind of ritual performed both to placate and to vanquish the bitch-goddess Success, and it is easier to call attention to ritual on film than in the theater. In the serious theater, we don't question abstract settings and abstracted language;

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on film, which achieves realism so easily, abstraction requires explanation. It is less that Mamet abstracts settings (although he does this on occasion, most notably during a consultation between Margaret and a patient: we see the two of them in the foreground and white sheets in the background) than that he abstracts the "environment" surrounding a set. In an outdoor scene at the start of the film in front of the institute where Margaret works, there is conversation between her and an admirer of her book, but there is no background sound. As Margaret walks across a big city street one night toward the "House of Games," no one is in sight, no cars pass, no sounds are heard, and the trickles of light appear nearly sculpted. In the airport baggage room where Margaret shoots Mike toward the end of the film, there's not a baggage handler to be found. Similarly, it is less that Mamet abstracts language than that he often has Crouse and Mantegna ritualistically intone their lines. The filmmaker Robert Bresson once said that the soundtrack invented silence; the filmmaker David Mamet may yet come to say that realism invented ritual.

The opening shot of *House of Games* is the gravel surface of a wall, from which the camera pans left to find Margaret Ford walking across an urban square. We are in the city, the image tells us, and the only "movement" we shall see is like that of the panning shot itself—confined to a single axis, in this case the one around which success revolves. The opening shot of *Housekeeping*, by contrast, is the American plains, over which the camera tracks from left to right. Just as Ruth's and Lucille's grandfather had done years before, the film soon moves from the plains to the mountains of Washington, where it remains; but the initial image and camera movement declare the film's general setting and Ruth and her aunt Sylvie's attitude toward it: we're out in the natural world, and we're there to move through and embrace it. Sylvie has been doing this for much of her adult life, more or less as a hobo, and she arrives in the small town of Fingerbone, Washington, in 1955 to assume the guardianship of her two teenaged nieces, Ruth and Lucille, whose mother, Helen (Sylvie's sister), had killed herself seven years before and whose grandmother (Sylvie's mother) has recently died. (The grandfather died in 1935 when the train he was riding plunged off a railroad bridge into a lake—the same Fingerbone lake into which his daughter Helen drove her car and drowned.) Sylvie and the girls live in the house where Sylvie and Helen grew up, but it is clear almost from the start that this arrangement won't be permanent. Sylvie arrives tentatively—she sidles up to the house and stands outside awhile in the snow—and nearly leaves the next morning by train. ("I like to travel by train," she says at one point. "Especially in the passenger cars.") Ruth and Lucille bring her back home, and their odd life together begins.

As one might expect of an itinerant confined to domestic life, Sylvie behaves eccentrically. She keeps old newspapers and fills the house with mounds of them; she washes used tin cans and carefully

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stores them—hundreds of them; she never answers the phone; she wanders around Fingerbone and its environs for hours at a time, sleeping on park benches, listening for trains in the distance, looking in store windows. Sylvie barely supervises the activities of her nieces, although she genuinely likes them both. In time Lucille, who craves supervision and orthodoxy in her life, falls out with both her aunt Sylvie and Ruth and goes to live with Miss Royce, her home economics teacher, who eventually adopts her. Lucille has grown into a typical teenaged girl: fashion- and looks-conscious, conscious of the social scene, and inchoately conscious of the direction she wants her life to take. Ruth is her opposite in every respect—she's dreamy, gawky, and bookish—and early reveals her affinity with Sylvie when she says in voice-over, as the film's retrospective narrator, "I felt an odd affinity with the hoboes at the bridge" (where she and Lucille went whenever they cut school). After a day-trip to a wild valley, Ruth and Sylvie spend the night in a rowboat on the lake under that bridge, near the spot where, over twenty years before, the 10:52 P.M. train derailed with their father/grandfather on board. This outing proves to be a dress rehearsal for their life together: soon after they return home by freight train, they learn that a court hearing is scheduled to decide whether custody of Ruth should be taken from the "unfit" Sylvie. Rather than be separated, Ruth and Sylvie set fire to the family home and flee across the bridge. Ruth the narrator says, "Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping," and we're left with a final image of glimmering railroad tracks stretching out into the night.

The director, Bill Forsyth, wants to make a serious point in *Housekeeping* at the same time that he doesn't want us to psychologize a character like Sylvie, to explain her away as an oddball who has good reasons in her past for being odd. So he uses comedy to keep us back, to make us view Sylvie's and Ruth's behavior more as a legitimate, spontaneous response to the world than as the result of longstanding, internal causes. In the second sequence, Forsyth sets the serious but comically distant tone for the rest of the film by making us amusedly accept Helen's suicide as the act of someone who no longer wishes to live in the world rather than soberly ask what events have led up to this woman's decision to kill herself. Here's how he does it. Helen puts her children Ruth and Lucille (Helen is divorced or separated, and that's all we learn about her marriage) in the back seat of a borrowed Ford for a trip from Seattle to Fingerbone "to see Grandma." For some reason, she's in a hurry: we see her stop, in long shot, at a red light and then, after some pause, deliberately drive through the intersection. She drops her daughters off at their grandmother's house, gives them a big bag of cookies, tells them not to fight and to wait for Grandma, then promptly leaves. We next see her impatiently sitting atop the Ford in a meadow. The car is stuck in mud, and three boys who have been fishing come along to help Helen out. To their puzzle-

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ment, she gives them her nice coat to put under one of the rear wheels for traction; mud sprays all over them, even over one boy's glasses, as Helen starts the engine and they push her car onto drier ground. She stops and, with the engine running, shoves her entire purse out the right-hand window with the words, "Take it." The boys demur but she insists, dangling the purse in the air. Finally the oldest boy reluctantly takes it and all three watch in surprise as Helen drives the car across the meadow, off a cliff, and into the lake, which doesn't become visible until just before she plunges into it. The boys chase after her and stand at the edge of the cliff looking out as the car disappears under the water. All of this has occurred in full or long shot—there have been no close-ups of an anguished Helen during her ride down, no close-ups of boys aghast at what they've witnessed.

This sequence occurs in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* (1980), from which Forsyth adapted the screenplay for his film, but it's not nearly as funny in the book. For one thing, Helen's plunge into the lake is a surprise in the film; in the book, Ruth tells us that Helen drove the Ford off a cliff, and then she reports the three boys' description of the event. Ruth's narration in the novel is dry and droll; we know that we're in the presence of a person as unusual as her aunt Sylvie, so we tend to accept the fact that she doesn't offer reasons for her mother's suicide and Sylvie's peripatetic life. Forsyth can't overwhelm us in the film with Ruth's voice-over narration in every scene, therefore he immediately establishes her as the narrator, reminds us of her role by bringing her in, in voice-over, sporadically throughout, and relies on whimsical comedy for the rest to create the effect that Ruth creates through her narration in the novel: detachment and amusement.

Anyone familiar with this Scottish director's other films—among them *Gregory's Girl* (1982) and *Comfort and Joy* (1984)—knows that he is adept at whimsical comedy. The difference in *Housekeeping* is that the comedy isn't whimsical for whimsicality's sake (however enjoyable that might be): it's linked to the idea that Sylvie and Ruth's whimsicality may be a legitimate and sustainable response to a world obsessed with *practicality*, with doing instead of being, with driving forward instead of floating along. We laugh when we see Sylvie and Ruth stop on the way home to watch TV through the window of someone's house (a moment invented by Forsyth), but at the same time we know that it wouldn't occur to either of these two to earn enough money to buy a television. (Sylvie doesn't work; her mother left behind savings off which Sylvie and her nieces live.)

The danger for the actresses playing Sylvie and Ruth, as one might guess, is that they'll turn their characters into "space cadets" or mere eccentrics. In the novel, Ruth describes Sylvie as "inhabit-[ing] a millennial present," and it is as if Christine Lahti took the cue for her character from this description and placed emphasis on the word "inhabit." She is careful to inhabit less her own mind than

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the world around her, beginning with her own clothing (which doesn't change as often as the girls', especially Lucille's) and extending out to the lake, the woods, and the hills. Sylvie is also interested in people in the world, and Lahti makes the most of moments with Ruth, Lucille, and several minor characters to display Sylvie's warmth and intelligence. This is not a freak or a mental case, but a woman who has chosen her way to live and is unyielding in her commitment to that choice. The introspective Ruth has instinctively chosen the same way to live, and naturally it is Sylvie who slowly reveals to her her choice and the rightness of it, and who brings her out. Bill Forsyth has directed teenagers in other films of his, but not in roles as complex as Ruth's and Lucille's. These two aren't just teenagers acting like teenagers; they're adolescents forced to make adult choices, to behave like adults. I can't explain how Forsyth got such convincing performances out of Sara Walker and Andrea Burchill, except to say that he didn't do it through fancy editing and the exploitation of the close-up. My guess is that Forsyth told Walker always to focus on her being in the world, on the eternal present and her relationship in it to people, places, and things; and that he told Burchill always to focus on her being in time, on the course her life was taking and would take in the future. Watch the way that each girl moves and touches for evidence of how different they are from each other. Whatever Forsyth said to these two novices, and to the experienced Lahti, the result is magical. And not the least part of *Housekeeping*'s magic is the Scottish Forsyth's filming of it: in his first work outside his native region, he takes an American novel and makes an authentic American film of it.

Stephen Frears, who established himself as the leader of the British New Wave with *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986) and *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987), now gives us *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid,* a sprawling yet pointed film whose subjects are domestic and sexual colonialism. Rafi Rahman, a former revolutionary who led Pakistan out of English colonialism and into exploitation by its own ruling class, escapes his native country with his life and his wealth and returns to London, where he was educated and where, nearly thirty years before, he had abandoned his son, Sammy, his first wife (he re-married in Pakistan), and Alice, his English mistress who had been willing to abandon her own husband for him. The charming, self-assured Rafi wants to see his beloved London once more; he wants to share his wealth with Sammy and urge him and his English wife, Rosie, to have a child; and he'd like to see Alice again. What he finds is a ne'er-do-well Sammy estranged (understandably) from him but willing to take his money; a politically committed Rosie who is also committed to an open marriage that leaves no room for children; an Alice who is happy to see him but doesn't want to feel used again; and an inner-city London (where Sammy and Rosie live) torn by racial rioting—at root, a reaction by blacks and Asians to what

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they regard as domestic colonialism, or the attempt by white "developers" to buy up property in their communities and thereby in effect run those communities. Rafi returns to find, not the "beloved London" of his imagination, but the real London in which he himself had suffered racial abuse during his student days and in which he had treated his wife and mistress more as objects than as people. The point is that London really hasn't changed, and neither has Rafi; what has changed is the response of racial minorities to the former and of women to the latter.

Rafi is searching for safe haven with Sammy and Rosie: he has money but wants company, wants family; he even offers to build them a house in the country if he may live there, too. But the dominant Rosie slowly turns on him the more she learns about the murder and torture he authorized when he was in power in Pakistan, and she finally turns him out of her and Sammy's apartment. Appropriately, she gets her information about her father-in-law from two lesbian lovers, a Pakistani and a black, both of whom are reporter/researchers for an alternative newspaper, and both of whom become repulsed and enraged at the mere sight of the overfed, sexist Rafi (who tells Sammy that he didn't have children by his second wife, he just had daughters). Even the loving Alice, whom he had rejected thirty years before, in the end rejects the man who could say of her, "Alice still has a good ten years' wear left." In desperation, Rafi seeks shelter with Danny, a black who has befriended him throughout the film and who lives in a run-down trailer in a squatters' camp under an overpass. No sooner does he get there and does Danny serve tea (!) than bulldozers arrive—supervised by Norman, Alice's businessman-son—to clear the squatters out in preparation for the area's "development." As the bulldozers begin work, Rafi is confronted with the detritus of his own domestic colonialism: a phantasmic Pakistani with one bandaged eye and an otherwise scarred, blackened face. Like Danny, this apparition has pursued or accompanied him throughout the film, but unlike Danny, the Pakistani is intended to externalize Rafi's guilt over his repressive leadership in his native country; and he tortures Rafi in this dream sequence in return for the torture he endured at the hands of Rafi's henchmen. Rafi finally crawls out of the trailer and is taken to Sammy and Rosie's apartment. There, as Sammy, Rosie, Alice, the two lesbians, and perhaps one or two others eat dinner in the living room, he hangs himself in a bedroom. And he stays there, hanging—without community, without family, without self—in the final frame: the guests have left, and Sammy and Rosie sit embracing and weeping in the foreground as the shadow of Rafi's body falls on a wall in the middle ground. An Edwardian waltz plays on the soundtrack.[1]

Rafi is an anachronism, and he must go. His legacy is less his

[1]This waltz is used to counterpoint the image on screen at several other moments in the film: for example, during the opening long shot of a rubble-strewn city lot, where the music is complemented by a voice-over of some of Margaret Thatcher's

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money than the persons of Danny and Sammy. Danny opens the film on a note of both struggle and humanity, a note he is to sound all through *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*: caught between the doors of an underground train, he forces them open and then, before departing, he holds them open so that an old white woman can get on. The essentially nonviolent Danny wants to know if London's domestic colonialism can be ended nonviolently. He doesn't get a conclusive answer, but his actions give the lie to Rafi's self-justificatory comment that "a man who hasn't killed is a virgin and doesn't understand the meaning of love." Rafi's violence in response to English colonialism in Pakistan begot further violence against his fellow Pakistanis. Danny hasn't killed and, unlike Rafi, *does* understand the meaning of love, and therein lies the film's hope: that Danny's love will become contagious and ultimately shame the domestic colonialists of inner-city London. They may crush Danny's trailer, but they can't crush him: he rides away from the flattened squatters' camp atop a van, smiling.

Sammy and Rosie Get Laid certainly closes on a note of love, with the titular characters' tearful embrace. These two have gotten laid by others during the film—Sammy by an American photographer named Anna, and Rosie by Danny and an unseen boyfriend named Walter—but not once by each other. Rosie says that she doesn't believe in fidelity, but her disbelief seems to be more a response to male *infidelity* in general and to Sammy's philandering in particular than to some inner prompting. (Shortly after Rosie remarks to Danny that she has difficulty coming to terms with men's minds, Sammy describes his immense sexual drive to Anna in these terms: "I'm like a little man being pulled around by a big dog.") Unlike her lesbian friends, Rosie can love men, but unlike Alice, she will not live through a man, will not make his penis her lifeline, to use one of the lesbians' phrasing. Rosie knows better, and she knows how to keep the promiscuous Sammy in check: by being promiscuous herself. Her response to sexually colonizing men is to use her sex as a weapon and colonize *them*; Anna, by contrast, has no such response to Sammy and as a result suffers. All she can do is threaten him with clichés: "For you, pursuing a woman is like hang gliding: just another challenge. Well, you'd better learn to love." It is the suicide of his father—who had rejected him and had treated his mother and Alice like so much baggage—that leads Sammy back into Rosie's embrace and seems to teach him that to get love he must give it, and give it freely. Rosie already knows this, and now she, too,

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choicer platitudes. A nineteenth-century hymn sung by choristers is also used to counterpoint the image: during an inner-city riot in which Rafi is saved from attack by Danny; and during the demolition of the squatters' camp, when the music is again complemented by a Thatcher prating of truth, faith, and harmony. The contrapuntal music on the soundtrack itself stands in contrast to music that is integral to the film and that comes from two groups on screen: the "Straggly Kids," a racially mixed band of minstrels who weave through the streets and the Underground of London, and the "Ghetto Lites," a Temptations-like foursome based at the squatters' camp.

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seems ready to give. So important is it here that they unite with each other rather than mourn Rafi, that no one has even bothered to cut his body down. It stands, or hangs, as a kind of monument to lovelessness.

Sammy and Rosie Get Laid was written by Hanif Kureishi, who also wrote *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Kureishi has said that he and Stephen Frears "want to make films that attack politically, that look critically at Britain today. Many British films are exercises in nostalgia: their view of Britain's past is sentimental or restricted to a certain class or group." Certainly *Sammy and Rosie* is not restricted to a particular class or group, and this is what accounts for its sprawling quality. We are constantly on the move, from the Underground out to the airport, from Sammy and Rosie's artsy apartment down to the inner-city street itself, from Alice's suburban home over to the squatters' camp. And the film could hardly be accused of taking a sentimental view toward its characters. What Kureishi can be accused of, however, is of writing dialogue that is sometimes not content merely to be pointed, but must instead indulge in overkill. Three examples: Sammy to Rafi, "If Leonardo da Vinci were alive today, he would have lived in the inner city, because the city is a mass of fascination"; Rosie to Rafi, "You've increased the amount of evil in the universe"; Alice to Rafi, "Like most women, my life has been based on denial, on the acknowledgment of limits." Before you say, "Poor Rafi," listen to what he himself says just before leaving Alice for the penultimate time: "How bitterness can drive a woman." Blue pencil, please! Frears's visual style, by contrast, does not call attention to itself (although the *content* of his images, for which Kureishi himself may be responsible, is occasionally redundant or excessive: see the shot that frames Virginia Woolf's photograph in flames). Most directors, for instance, use rack focusing, or shallow focus, to direct the viewer's eyes forcibly from one subject to another. In the scene where Rosie reads to Sammy the statement of a man tortured by Rafi's government, Frears uses this technique not to direct our attention forcibly to Sammy, but to suggest that Sammy has tuned Rosie out because he can't believe what he's hearing. *We* still hear her reading, but her blurred image implies that Sammy is no longer listening to her. The acting of Frances Barber as Rosie in this emotional scene is typical of the acting of the major parts in *Sammy and Rosie*: it's marked by ease and restraint, by silken understatement. (Shashi Kapoor, Ayub Khan Din, Roland Gift, and Claire Bloom play Rafi, Sammy, Danny, and Alice, respectively.) Naturally, such acting can help one to get away with Kureishi's more obtrusive lines, but it also seems to be a character strategy adopted in response to a tumultuous age: to react by not reacting, or, when one does react, to expend one's energy and emotion judiciously. Very British, in general, but even more British than usual here.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Free-Standing Structures

ENCOUNTERING MERCE CUNNINGHAM'S DANCE AFTER A LAPSE of a year or so always takes some adjustment. It's like entering an alien landscape, a city of astygmatically laid-out neighborhoods inhabited by an advanced race of beings who communicate in more efficient ways than the rest of us. After a while I get almost familiar with the oddness. I almost understand what they're saying, and I grow quite fond of the atmosphere. The spring performances at the Joyce Theater seemed at times more remote than ever, and my reactions to the repertory as it extended over a month's time swung from alienation to pleasure and back again.

The dances that moved me most were older ones I'd seen several times. Not just the two revivals, *Septet* (1953) and *RainForest* (1968), but *Points in Space* and *Shards* (1987), *Pictures* (1984), and *Inlets 2* (1983). At first sight, a Cunningham dance seems all individual movements, encounters, without form or memory. I have to go through the territory a couple of times before I respond to its inner sensations as well as taking in the sights. Even oldies can go out of recognition temporarily, when new dancers get cast in them, as *Quartet* did this season. We're meant to think of Cunningham's dancers as pure conveyors of movement. They're not supposed to put a particularly individualistic or expressive stamp on their roles, nor would he want us to become too fond of any fixed representation of a piece of choreography. Yet his best dances become subtly imprinted with the personalities and the temperaments of the dancers, in spite of everything.

I saw *RainForest* for the first time in ten years with a completely new cast, none of whom has been with the company more than four years. It's become virtually a new dance. It could even foreshadow some future Cunningham company, one where the atmosphere is somewhat warmer than the remote and objective climate that has prevailed in this generation. I'm thinking of the difference between Patricia Lent and Helen Barrow's clean, dry classicism and the more voluptuous line of Kristy Santimyer, the irrepressible joyousness of Victoria Finlayson. Or the relatively unrefined gravity of recruits Robert Wood, who took Cunningham's role, and Larissa McGoldrick. Until this production, I hadn't thought *RainForest* was so much about weight—about dependency, willfulness, and driven inner conflict.

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Those qualities are implicit in the choreography but not always realized. More often, in all of the repertory, the dancers look held back, withdrawn, as if giving in to their weight would throw them hopelessly out of control. There's a light, speedy, technical thrust to their movement that superficially reminds me of ballet, but what they do is far more elusive in the memory than ballet because it seldom coagulates in clear designs. Like their ballet counterparts, the dancers have very active and articulate feet, and their main mode of locomotion is walking and running. Unlike ballet dancers, they often scatter and regroup with a mysterious urgency.

Sometimes the dance reveals the process that caused this atomization. In *Shards*, clad in army-surplus grey, green or black unitards, the eight dancers stand apart from one another, doing stopped gestures and bits of rhythmic phrases. Without seeming to be in visual contact, they begin echoing and shadowing each other's moves. Though almost claustrophobically independent, they share a common vocabulary, but only parts of it, and only two or three individuals at a time. The shared material coheres in bigger and bigger parcels, until all the dancers finally are doing the same thing. At this point, they all start leaving and the dance ends. The gradual and randomized acquisition of this unanimity, and its immediate nullification, is a totally absorbing social activity to watch.

In other dances, the organizing principle is Cunningham himself, now nearly immobile but central to whatever is happening around him. Now almost seventy, Cunningham looks an old man onstage, and he seems to be trying out ways of remaining in his dances without reducing the capabilities of the company. Instead of merely occupying a static focal position, which was Martha Graham's strategy in the years before she retired, Cunningham actually plays paternal or avuncular roles in his dances. In *Fabrications* and *Pictures*, the stage begins to look like a dance class as soon as he appears. Cunningham sketches the movements he wants the others to elaborate on, puts himself into the dancers' lineup and begins a sequence but lets them finish it, shepherds a woman gallantly through moves she might do later with a more agile partner.

And there are dances that create an atmosphere or a central image, seductive in itself, that shapes an otherwise unfathomable situation. In *Pictures*, a musical synthesized drone by David Behrman supports a slow, almost languid progression of walks, crawls, and lifts that smolder in silhouetted pauses against Mark Lancaster's white cyclorama. In *Inlets 2* John Cage's recorded sounds of water gurgling in conch shells and burning pine cones surround the dancers with an almost natural landscape. In their filmy skirts and a dim light, the women sometimes look birdlike, sometimes fishy. And in *Carousal* (1987) the idea of a circus or carnival is suggested by the fragmentary stunts, the modest flourishes of a few makeshift props, and once you make the connection, otherwise neutral goings-on are also touched with wry exhibitionism. I suspect *Carousal* wouldn't be

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half as funny without this allusion, nor would *Septet* be quite so beautiful if it didn't make us see the formal perfections of ballet through its zany improprieties.

It's in the dances where no pattern or image occurs to me that I feel most alienated from Cunningham. I saw the new dance, *Eleven*, twice, but couldn't get a grip on it. Perhaps Robert Ashley's literal yet meaningless score kept me at a distance—Takeshisa Kosugi and Michael Pugliese read short, nonsequential phrases antiphonally for x number of seconds, were silent for x number of seconds, then started again. I looked and looked at the eleven dancers, dressed in grey leotards overlaid with white pants or vests splotched in the bright colors of a Sam Francis painting. I saw action, bodies, but only that.

The bodies characteristically are vertical in posture and orientation. Even when they're seated or when they fall, even when they throw their upper bodies to one side, Cunningham dancers look straight. With acutely tuned multi-directionality, they can twist and bend, carving several shapes at once. Legs and torsos seem to be all-important, arms don't matter. When they travel, the hands are clubbed in a mannered way, and the arms hang from the shoulder sockets in one curved piece. Did Cunningham once tell them not to "do" anything with their arms, and is this stiff, unnatural position the way they cope with the idea? They seem to be trying to achieve a certain body look, but to have no agreement about how to project it. Sometimes they fasten their attention on some person or goal in space, making a clear, lively approach. Other times they seem almost sightless, giving up space even as they claim it, as though they were looking out the window of a moving train.

This season Cunningham's company celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary. It began (though Cunningham had been choreographing on his own for almost a decade before that) just a few blocks away from the Joyce, in the Beatnik days of Greenwich Village. Although Cunningham and Cage have long outlived those days, and probably never acknowledged any connection to them, they clearly belong in the rebel-artist tradition of Thoreau, Whitman, Ferlinghetti, Burroughs, Kerouac, Bob Dylan—for all their anti-romantic protestations. Cunningham dance has always been carried on apart from official culture, and mostly without the culture's approval. Perhaps Doing Your Own Thing Regardless all this time has made the dancers grow a kind of protective layer over their movement, a portable mist that they take with them to keep out hostile stares. When they feel most relaxed about what they're doing, particularly in some of the animated duets, they can penetrate this self-space and focus actively on their partners. It seems understood among them that there are certain dances when they can interact with each other and certain ones where they shouldn't. John Cage has used the expression "purposeless play," and I see that in Cunningham himself, but only a few of the dancers look playful, ever. With the drab, doggy

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costumes and lighting that dominate the repertory under artistic advisors William Anastasi and Dove Bradshaw, an evening of Cunningham is a somber undertaking. For some critics it constitutes a rite—a pilgrimage, almost a penitential cleansing.

I don't mean that I find Cunningham anything less than wonderful as a choreographer, or that his dancers aren't superb performing animals. Only that there are tinges of morbidity in his offerings now, and a sacerdotal tone in the way people talk about him. He's the last great master left who's still breaking ground, and opinion in the dance world, always hovering anxiously around ephemeral achievements, seems even more precarious in these days of too much death. Unconsciously, we oscillate in our praise between timely acclamation and premature burial.

Cunningham's influence over the dance of the eighties is still enormous, but two of his most devoted disciples, Douglas Dunn and Kenneth King, have orbited into realms the master never imagined. Both presented new pieces during the Cunningham season, reinforcing the tradition of the outsider, and perhaps offering the extremes of fantasy as an alternative to the overly serious contemplation induced by Cunningham's literality.

Dunn's *Matches*, shown at the Kitchen, was a bizarre spectacle that I thought at various times was a sendup, an homage, or a schizophrenic peek at dance-theater conventions in history that started from nowhere and became totems. Some of the references I noted in my program were Isadora Duncan, Robert Wilson, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, Chinese opera, Kathakali, and the nightclub adagio act. But this gives no idea of the weirdness of Dunn's vision.

The space is set with large cutout pieces (the production was designed by Mimi Gross)—foliage, a tree with a sort of Victorian cottage perched in its branches, a huge rocklike formation, a backdrop depicting a lakeside landscape. While the sound of a hand dabbling in water sloshes from two speakers, Dunn enters dressed in a gauzy, short pink kimono with his hair tied in two bunches, Samurai style, and his face made up like an aged prostitute's. He slowly perambulates the set, pushing some of the pieces back to make room for dancing. Susan Blankensop, Grazia Della-Terza and Jane Townsend enter like the three little maids in *The Mikado*, and make mincing, predatory advances on Bill Young, while uttering tiny conspiratorial yips and moans of glee. Young and Dunn dance a duet where they take coy poses and seem to be attacking each other with draperies. Two women sit inside the tree-house window, bending toward each other with excessively delicate gestures. Since they're only seen in silhouette, we don't know if they're spying, gossiping, or painting their faces. Dunn holds up a cloth—displaying it very solemnly, the way a Balinese dancer shows off his costume—while a clumsy wooden duck is hauled across a wire overhead. There are various tribal

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dances, meant to look "savage," the most grotesque being the one Dunn performs after emerging from inside the flame-lit rock like some god of the volcano. After being fought over, done in, and evidently disembowelled by the others, Dunn revives and concludes the dance with a worried look on his face.

Dunn's movement is extrapolated from the quirkier side of Cunningham. They are both great mimes, intelligent absurdists, and in recent years Dunn has carried this eccentric wit into fantasy and exaggeration. He satirizes male-female relations, especially as they have been represented in modern dance, and he's one of the few male artists to go public as a committed feminist. In questioning conventional sexual roles, he also questions his power as a dancer, his responsibility as a performer. He pursues the body's gaucheries, the spirit's failures and compensatory bad taste, the misjudged but still thoroughly enacted encounter, as the means to self-knowledge.

Kenneth King, equally brainy and fanciful, has spiralled toward an increasingly rarefied, idealized vision of the dancing body. With *If Iphigenia* he too is working to merge dancer and character. Where Dunn brings the character aspect to the fore, with costume, makeup, facial expressions and gestures drawn from specific prototypes, King is trying to infuse his native danciness with expressive overtones. *If Iphigenia* is almost as abstract as any Cunningham dance. Except for the program designations of characters and their alter egos from the *Oresteia*, there's not much to illustrate the Greek epic from which the dance is taken. But I could think of the dancers as timeless essences of those characters, spirits that have been wafting through the world for a couple of thousand years, spreading the fallout from their victories and mistakes over the moral life of Western civilization. Kenneth King calls the dance a dramatic tone poem or a kinetic action painting.

In a luminous space filled with Jeffrey McRoberts' lighting effects and Constance Demby's New-Age synthesizer music, seven dancers dressed in silvery body suits with individual tailoring to suit their roles (costumes were by A. Christina Giannini) travel along imaginary pathways. Kenneth King's movement style, like Cunningham's, is very leggy and rhythmically erratic. In the first part of the dance it seems very grounded, almost laborious, and the dancers' faces look agonized as they gesture and strain toward their destinations. Often the characters seem to be desperately involved with each other, but they hardly touch. King, as the Figure of Orestes, dances a solo that's as fractured and contorted as someone with King's long, composed body can manage. There's a duet between the Iphigenia/Double (June Omura) and Orestes/Double (Paul Sutherland), in which Orestes' dislocated movement translates into a sort of malevolence. In the days of expressionistic modern dance, this might have signified incestuous desires, or revealed a flawed character.

In fact, there is more than one token of pre-Cunningham mod-

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ern dance in this piece: symbolic figures, dramatic gestures, and an implicit message to be drawn from mythic struggles. In the second half of the dance, the movement becomes more airborne, and one transfigured woman seems to expiate all the guilt and sorrow the others have suffered. King's dance, like Douglas Dunn's, was beguiling on the surface and mystifying beneath. What makes both choreographers special to me is that they continue to insist that dance can say more than words, even if what it says escapes most of the audience.

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JAY PARINI

Sartre's Life of Writing

IT IS RARE FOR AN INTELLECTUAL FIGURE to acquire celebrity status, even in France. But when Sartre died in 1980, a crowd of over fifty thousand gathered at the cemetery on Montparnasse for his funeral, while the whole nation watched on television. Sartre had become, in Witold Gombrowicz's witty phrase, "the Eiffel Tower of French culture." Like that famous tower, Sartre was ludicrously prominent, "modern" to a fault, and showy as can be. As a philosopher, his main calling, he was less original or influential than, say, Heidegger or Husserl or Wittgenstein. As a novelist, he could not match Camus or Gide. As a playwright, Ionesco, Beckett, and others leave him in the dust. But the sum total of the man, as *intellectual*, remains vastly impressive, in part because Sartre so completely embodied the consciousness of post-War Europe. He became a symbol. But of what?

Eight years after his death, we can begin to understand something of the phenomenon of Sartre, though it will be decades before a genuine assessment of his impact on modern letters or philosophy can properly be made. The scholars and biographers have been busy, as usual, and Sartre is a great trough at which hundreds will feed in the coming years. Two full-length biographies have recently appeared, one by Annie Cohen-Solal,[1] the other by Ronald Hayman.[2] For the first time, the basic facts of his life have been arranged in a narrative, if not subjected to analysis. A number of other books on Sartre's work have also appeared, the most interesting among them being Iris Murdoch's *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*.[3] As if to confirm the revival of interest in Sartre, the University of Chicago Press has been issuing an English version of Sartre's massive biographical study of Flaubert, *The Family Idiot* (the second of three volumes was recently published).[4]

I've been reading these books for several months, trying to understand Sartre. It's not easy, and part of the fault lies with Sartre himself, who seems little to have understood his own life. When his mother read his own account of his childhood years in *The Words*,

[1]SARTRE: A Life, by *Annie Cohen-Solal*. Pantheon. $24.95.
[2]SARTRE: A Biography, by *Ronald Hayman*. Simon & Schuster. $22.95.
[3]SARTRE: The Romantic Rationalist, by *Iris Murdoch*. Viking. $14.95.
[4]THE FAMILY IDIOT: Gustave Flaubert, 1821–1857, Volume 2, by *Jean-Paul Sartre*. Trans. by *Carol Cosman*. University of Chicago Press. $27.50.

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she said: "*Poulou n'a pas compris sa jeunesse.*" It was a difficult *jeunesse* to comprehend. Sartre's father was a tediously dull naval officer who died when Sartre was a boy. An only child, he was spoiled by his mother and his doting grandparents, who led him to believe the whole world hung on his every phrase, and—here is the oddity—the world eventually did. Most people who suffer delusions of grandeur can't convince the world to join their delusion. Sartre, on this count, was lucky.

From the outset, Sartre was recognized by his elders as a "brain." He graduated first in his class from the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure. (Believe it or not, Simone de Beauvoir, his lifetime companion, came in second—establishing an obvious pattern in their relationship that neither overcame.) The 1930s were Sartre's least "successful" years, spent teaching high school in Le Havre. As Cohen-Solal suggests in her wonderfully detailed study, based on years of research and interviews with many of Sartre's relatives and associates, he was an inspiring though unconventional teacher. Students were not, in the traditional French way, treated as inferiors. They became his friends. And Sartre scoffed at the Prussian methods still employed by most teachers then: the dependence on discipline, memorization, rote learning. Sartre was a natural anarchist, and he cultivated, if anything, a sense of anarchy. Not surprisingly, his students did just as well, even better, on their exams than their contemporaries.

Sartre's earliest books were all turned down by publishers, and he was thirty-three before Gallimard finally agreed to publish his first novel, *Nausea*, in 1938. This inventive, highly speculative novel is, I think, the best thing Sartre ever did. It sounds like cruel and unusual criticism to say that a writer's first book was his best, but it seems true. *Nausea*, as Iris Murdoch points out in her terse but brilliant study of Sartre's career as a writer and philosopher, "contains all his main interests except the political ones." In it, Sartre meditates on the nature of memory and of thought itself. Its hero, Antoine Roquentin, "discovers" that life is contingent, that we relate to the world not intuitively but discursively. I doubt that it's an either-or situation, but Sartre doesn't. His hero, in the process of learning how to read the world and his relation to it, becomes the embodiment of philosophical man, though Roquentin is hardly a man: he is a vehicle for Sartre's speculation. As such, he is fascinating. The novel is not a novel, per se; it is a prose-poem. Like Virginia Woolf or Joyce, Sartre often conjures moments of pure aesthetic reflection. The book is noticeably apolitical, though Roquentin's disgust with bourgeois society amounts to something like the beginnings of a political position. What's good about *Nausea* is the way Sartre has reduced the human condition to its essentials, revealing a bare, abstract pattern that produces, as the title suggests, a kind of nausea.

For a man who would later become hyper-political, Sartre began

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with the usual Modernist detachment from overt politics, a carry-over from the aestheticism of the Belle Epoque. He took no interest in the Spanish Civil War, for instance. His personal life, relations with women, his writing and teaching, absorbed him utterly. Even World War II seems to have had little effect on him. Though he formed a discussion group called "Socialism and Freedom" during the Occupation, they did little but meet periodically for a chat. Sartre never wrote an explicit word about Nazi atrocities, nor did he contribute much to the Resistance.

He began, nonetheless, to think that philosophy and literature should impinge on life. What he did was to mix his own blend of phenomenology from the previous work of Husserl and Heidegger, adding his own concern for "freedom" as it relates to individual action. He called this mixture a "philosophy of existence," and when the media labeled the new thinking "Existentialism," Sartre gladly accepted the term, realizing it was catchy. And why not? The central concerns of the new philosophy are contained in his massive text of 1943, *Being and Nothingness*. That somewhat impenetrable tome takes up and develops the themes presented in *Nausea*, the main one being the nature of consciousness.

Here, Sartre is a philosopher in the tradition of Descartes. His concern with "freedom" is inextricably involved with his concern for picturing consciousness. He insists, like Descartes, on the supremacy of the *cogito*, but his interests (unlike most other serious philosophers of consciousness) are psychological rather than linguistic. For him (as for Roquentin), consciousness becomes the flux between moments of perception, of being, wherein objects exist "in-themselves" against a background of negation, of nothingness, the empty spaces between the stars. To perceive the "thinginess" of things is the beginning of Sartrean wisdom. But what about the Self? Here value comes into play (*la valeur*): that mystical entity which is non-contingent but real nonetheless. "The supreme value towards which consciousness, by its very nature, is constantly transcending itself is the absolute being of the self, with its qualities of identity, purity, permanence," writes Sartre.

Humankind seems endlessly shifting between Being and Nothing, between value and non-value, between Being-in-Itself (*être-en-soi*) and Being-for-Itself (*être-pour-soi*). This latter contrast, the in-itself versus the for-itself, has become famous. We seek, according to Sartre, the former, the (valued) thinginess of reality, the in-itself. The for-itself is an "outside" state, the sense of consciousness playing over the world of things, a state of pure consciousness. Only God, says Sartre, ever attains both senses of reality, the condition of being *en-soi-pour-soi*; the human condition denies it. This is ultimately a depressing philosophy, wherein human nature defines itself as a lack of completeness. Sartrean man is, as he notes toward the end of *Being and Nothingness*, a reverse Christ, aspiring to lose his hu-

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manness, to become God. But since God doesn't exist (because His existence defies logic), man is perpetually foiled: "*L'homme est une passion inutile.*"

What's interesting, and noble, is that Sartre refuses to sink into a self-satisfied, rational despair. He declares an end to "the reign of value" in the old sense. The discovery that all human activity is a vain attempt to transmogrify man into God is the pre-condition of freedom. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre does not develop the implications of this newfound freedom, though, as Denis Hollier notes, in this work Sartre "encountered the imperative of an ethics." That ethics will unfold in "Existentialism Is a Humanism," the great essay of 1946, where the Existentialist creed is codified (if not ossified). It becomes an underlying theme in the four novels gathered under the title, *The Roads to Freedom*—all written during the war and shortly after.

Oddly enough, the war years were amazingly conducive to productivity for Sartre, who wrote much of his best creative work then, excluding *Nausea*. The novels have been mentioned: not one of them has the centripetal energy of *Nausea*, but the sum of the four is considerable. As in *Nausea*, all human communication seems difficult, even impossible. The superabundance of *things* produces nausea in *Nausea*; in *Roads to Freedom* it is the horror of the flesh that produces loathing. Murdoch says: "The flesh symbolises the absolute loss of freedom, and references to its inertness, flabbiness, stickiness, heaviness form a continual accompaniment to the narrative."

It was also during the war years that Sartre wrote his two finest plays, *The Flies* (1943) and *No Exit* (1944), the former a Sartrean riff on the Electra-Orestes theme, the latter an "existential" portrait of hell, defined here as "other people." These are remarkable works, very much in accord with the Modernist theater in France. Jean Giraudoux, Cocteau, and Jean Anouilh had all refashioned Greek myths for the contemporary theater, so Sartre's *The Flies* was, if anything, *à la mode*. In his version of the myth, Orestes returns to Argos and finds it wallowing in regret, choked; the citizens "held their tongues . . . said nothing," as Jupiter says, trying to convey the cowardice of the town in the face of its king's death. The men of Argos, in a moment of recognition, plead: "Forgive us for living while you are dead." The parallel with the Occupation is implicit, with Sartre arguing that free men should assume responsibility for their actions, no matter what the consequences. The play was "unsuccessful" in that few people attended (and the critics dismissed it), but Sartre felt buoyed by the experience. "If *Nausea* had not been published, I would have gone on writing," he said, "but if *The Flies* had not been performed, I wonder whether I would have gone on writing plays, since my main concerns kept me so far from the theater in those days."

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No Exit, written a year after *The Flies*, was more original and shocking. "I asked myself," Sartre said, "how one could keep three people together and never let one of them get away and how to keep them together to the end, as if for eternity? Thereupon it occurred to me to put them in hell and make each of them the others' torturer." It doesn't surprise one that *No Exit* should come from the inhabitant of an occupied zone. Pneumonia, a gas stove, twelve bullets in one's chest: they are all dead. Thus begins an eerie drama of attraction and repulsion, with eternity surrounding them on all sides like sheets of flame. "Hell is—other people!" Garcin cries, reversing the cry of Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*: "Which way I fly am hell. Myself am hell." This is among the great moments of modern theater.

The progress of Sartre from high school teacher and coterie writer to world-famous intellectual is chronicled in meticulous detail by Cohen-Solal and echoed by Hayman (who used Cohen's Solal's pioneering work as a basis for his own), though neither writer knows quite what to make of the story. Sartre's career is so diverse, his writings and relationships so copious, that neither author even attempts to interpret the whole range of material. On the other hand, the story itself is worth recounting, and it is astonishing that—thanks mostly to Cohen-Solal—we already know so much about Sartre.

A symbolic moment in his life occurred on 29 October 1945. Sartre was invited to lecture on Existentialism at the Salle des Centraux in the Rue Jean Goujon. The event was advertised widely in Paris on posters. But the organizers never banked on what happened. By the time Sartre arrived, a vast crowd had already gathered in the streets, cramming the door. (His first thought was that the Communists had organized a demonstration against him.) He spent fifteen minutes pushing through the crowd, trying to get to the podium. It was like the Beatles' arrival in New York: chairs were thrown, girls fainted, the audience screamed so loudly that nobody could hear the refined, articulate drone of Sartre's lecture. But it didn't matter. Sartre had ceased to be listened to. Celebrity had replaced recognition.

Sartre became an entrepreneur of sorts, founding his own journal, *Les Temps modernes*, to promote his various causes. The first issue contained a declaration of intent:

> The writer has a place in his age. Each word has an echo, as does each silence. I hold Flaubert and the Goncourts responsible for the repression that followed the Commune because they did not write a single line to prevent it. It was none of their business, you may say. But then was the Calas trial Voltaire's business? Was Dreyfus's sentence Zola's business?

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He was entirely right to ask these questions. Writers are responsible for what happens in their age. Their silence is telling, an act of collaboration. So is their ignorance. (I think, today, of the general ignorance surrounding the massacres in East Timor, in Indonesia, that have taken place since 1980. Low estimates suggest that over 100,000 people have been murdered there by the Indonesian government, which received heavy U.S. military backing.)

Sartre became increasingly political—fanatically so—in the postwar years, supporting a wide range of left-wing causes and revolutionary committees. He played cat-and-mouse with the Communist Party, writing an anti-Communist play (*Dirty Hands*) in 1948 that, later, he would renounce. Wanting desperately to believe that the Soviets had, in fact, managed to create a genuine Marxist society, Sartre bent over backwards in the early fifties to support them; but this became impossible after the invasion of Hungary in 1956, and he withdrew his endorsement. In his later years, he supported a group of student Maoists called the Proletarian Left, becoming their figurehead for a while as "editor" of their crudely printed handouts. In fact, Sartre was in the late sixties a kind of hero to the student left throughout the world.

The need to rationalize his commitment to political activity led to his last major philosophical effort, *The Critique of Dialectical Materialism* (1960), a projected two-volume effort of which only the first was ever published. The work was written—thirty to forty pages a day—in what Cohen-Solal describes as "a wild rush of words and juxtaposed ideas, pouring forth during crises of hyperexcitement, under the effect of contradictory drugs. . . . Everything in excess." The work meditates on the meeting between Marxism and Existentialism: an attempt to get Marxists to recognize, as Murdoch says, that "the *aventure singulière* of human existence must be returned to the centre of the picture." Sartre was looking for ways in which individuals relate to their historical surroundings via a continuous mediation between the general and the particular; he was trying to understand the nature and place of free choice in this overall scheme.

Methods of "mediation" were sought in the human sciences—psychology, anthropology, and sociology—though Sartre keeps returning to his philosophical base, which is always the phenomenology of consciousness. Sartre came to see history as driven, as he says, "not by scientific laws or by an abstract inhuman super-purpose, but by human willed purposes, so that its explanation and being lie in a study of conscious human activity." Historical inevitability, the baseline of Orthodox Marxism, went out the window. In general, Sartre was trying to connect Marxism with the old Hegelian subject-object phenomenology of mind, and to reinstate the theme of human purpose in history. He was also trying to formulate a critique of Western culture in the guise of philosophy, though he never really accomplished this goal. Instead of making a sustained analysis of

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existing institutions with concrete proposals for change, he indulged in random indictments, his rhetoric swelling at times to something approaching the apocalyptic.

The failure of coherence which mars *The Critique* is even more troublesome in his last great work, *The Family Idiot*, a biographical study of Flaubert. This work obsessed Sartre in his later years, and it was finally published (in French) in 1971 (volumes I and II) and 1972 (volume III). Like his previous "biographies" of Baudelaire (1946) and Genet (1956), Sartre takes huge liberties with the genre, mixing in autobiography, philosophical rumination, and criticism. He pays scant allegiance to the facts, using them as a launching pad for speculation. The unique *mythos* of each life provides instances galore of existential choices, though one suspects that Sartre distorts the lives to fit them to his philosophical schema. He should have followed the example of his earliest hero, Roquentin, who abandons his biography of de Rollebon when he sees that no amount of factual knowledge can make another person's life any more "real." In *Nausea*, this is all part of Roquentin's mounting awareness that one cannot form an absolute notion of one's past. It is also part of Sartre's typically Modernist lack of faith in epistemological certainty. One wonders what drove him to attempt in his last major work what he had previously decided was impossible.

In his quasi-autobiography, *The Words*, Sartre comments that words, for him, became a substitute for religion. This logocentrism led him to scribble upwards of 10,000 words a day for much of his adult life. The resulting shelf of over fifty books—several of spectacular length—presents a bizarre spectacle of self-indulgence and a daunting challenge to the critic or biographer. Cohen-Solal and Hayman have made the initial attempts to comprehend this spectacle, at least by sorting out the obvious facts and arranging them in chronology. Their lack of analysis is, to a small degree, made up for by Iris Murdoch, who has *understood* Sartre better than any other critic thus far. But the real work of assimilating Sartre is still before us.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Salvos from the Gender War

IF YOU HAVEN'T HEARD ABOUT IT, you haven't been hanging around the academy lately: Gender is *in*. Not sex, what with all the current worries about social diseases, but gender most definitely. Whether it's the poetry of Torquato Tasso or Alexander Pope, the novels of Samuel Richardson or Ernest Hemingway, the plays of Shakespeare or Shaw, you had better not plan on making a critical reputation these days by concerning yourself merely with their language or "literary" value. For in the prefatory words to a recent collection of essays titled "The Poetics of Gender" ("poetics" incidentally is another rave favorite in the academy, applied to any and all subjects, gender to ketchup), "Feminist criticism has shown that the social construction of sexual difference plays a constitutive role in the production, reception, and history of literature."[1] These critics ask "what it might mean to read and write through the prism of gender," and they have not been behindhand in coming up with answers.

The most influential and confident of such answerers have been two academics, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, whose survey of nineteenth-century women writers, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), found this madwoman (the prototype is Bertha Mason Rochester in *Jane Eyre*) in every woman writer's attic, even Jane Austen's, which hitherto we had thought clean and tidy. (I still do think it's pretty bare of unseemly people, but no matter.) In 700-odd pages, Gilbert and Gubar thoroughly explained and interpreted novels by Jane Austen, the Brontës, Mary Shelley, George Eliot, and the poems of Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson. Their chapter titles bore sensationally promising invitations to the stories told therein: "Emily Brontë's Bible of Hell"; "George Eliot as the Angel of Destruction"; "Strength in Agony: Nineteenth-Century Poetry by Women." Their model of conflict between the writer, her society and her precursors, was at least as agonistic as Harold Bloom's, from whose lexicon they borrowed terms, refashioning them so as to accommodate the other gender. Although *Madwoman* was relatively untheoretical (feminists who groove on Luce Irigray and Hélène Cixous find Gilbert and Gubar somewhat too unFrenchily down-home in their approach to "texts"), the book became a basic reference-point for teachers and critics who deal with gender issues in classic nineteenth-century novels and poems.

[1] *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. by Nancy K. Miller (New York, 1986).

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Now this team (hereafter G&G) has brought out the first of three volumes dealing with the woman writer in our century.[2] "The War of the Words" is described as "an overview of social, literary, and linguistic interactions between men and women from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present," and G&G promise to "theorize about the ways in which modernism, because of the distinctive social and cultural changes to which it responds, is differently inflected for male and female writers." In their preface they warn us that, back in the bad old days of New Criticism (though the culprit is not so named), "a number of literary critics dealt with texts as if they were autonomous and universal monuments of unaging intellect." It was this practice that distorted understanding of the modern period: "Privileging certain works as purely aesthetic or philosophic objects and repressing significant aspects of the history in which the authors . . . were engaged, many readers and teachers failed to perceive the sexual struggle" lying beneath them. No such naivete for these clear-eyed perceivers of that struggle:

> Once we reimagine the author as a gendered human being whose text reflects key cultural conditions, we can conflate and collate individual literary narratives, so that they constitute one possible metastory, a story of stories about gender strife in this period.

In other words, what Kenneth Burke or Cleanth Brooks were doing when they analyzed monuments of unaging intellect like "Sailing to Byzantium" or "Among School Children," was not merely ignoring "history" but—for G&G—the only history that matters, sexual politics. In Robert Graves's memorable lines, "There is one story and one story only / That will prove worth your telling."

Volume One of *No Man's Land* has already been praised by a reviewer for the clarity of its prose, and it's true that compared to some feminist theorists G&G lack obscurity and pretentiousness. Still, the ease with which they embrace the going academic-critical jargon isn't cause for satisfaction. To speak of "privileging" the individual work and "repressing" history, makes to my ears a drearily predictable start; to have a "text" reflect[s] key cultural conditions," is not to improve the terms of discourse—especially if one doesn't read books to see key cultural conditions reflected in them. As we move on through conflating and collating and constituting "one

[2] NO MAN'S LAND: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century. Volume 1: *The War of the Worlds*, by *Sandra M. Gilbert* and *Susan Gubar*. Yale University Press. $22.95.

The book's preface concludes with a wall-to-wall acknowledging of their familial debts, first to their respective husbands, one of whom was so supportive as to help make compatible their two systems of word-processing; then to their five children; then their mothers, still alive, who have bequeathed them "fierce survival instincts"; finally their fathers, both dead, who taught them to "love men" and to whom they dedicate the book. My critical spirit was almost disarmed.

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possible metastory," it all begins to sound thoroughly departmental, further and further away from those old, "autonomous," wrongly-privileged poems and stories and novels we admired as works of imagination. This is the language of professional litsociology as spoken in the late 1980s, and it brought to mind the wistful question Randall Jarrell asked thirty-five years ago in "The Age of Criticism": "Critics exist simply to help us with works of art—isn't that true?"

What happens when these critics go to work on particular works of art? They apologize in the preface for the brevity of their "readings," since this introductory volume must deal with so much material; and they promise later on to analyze major texts in detail, devoting "entire chapters to key figures." But it may not be *lengthier* readings we need from them—at least I had doubts after reading their first chapter, titled "The Battle of the Sexes." Its opening questions are wholly rhetorical: "Is a pen a metaphorical pistol? Are words weapons with which the sexes have fought over territory and authority?" Better believe it if you're going to turn out a three-volumed work on the subject, so away we go with sex-warrior Ted Hughes in a typically lurid bit from *Crow* ("His looks were bullets daggers of revenge / Her glances were ghosts in the corner with horrible secrets / His whispers were whips and jackboots / Her kisses were lawyers steadily writing"). No matter that this isn't a very good poem, it gets G&G started on a tour of some major battlefields of the sex war: Tennyson's "The Princess" and Gilbert and Sullivan's rewriting of it; *The Blithedale Romance*; *The Bostonians*; Swinburne, Prufrock, Yeats, Lawrence, Faulkner, Nathanael West, *Paterson*, *An American Dream*, and many others.

Poems and stories thus exist to demonstrate or "prove" G&G's point that "the consciousness of sex warfare" pervades modern literature. At one point early along they take on a relatively minor instance of that warfare, T. S. Eliot's "Cousin Nancy" (quoted here to jog the reader's memory):

> Miss Nancy Ellicott
> Strode across the hills and broke them,
> Rode across the hills and broke them—
> The barren New England hills—
> Riding to hounds
> Over the cow-pasture.
>
> Miss Nancy Ellicott smoked
> And danced all the modern dances;
> And her aunts were not quite sure how they felt about it,
> But they knew it was modern.

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> Upon the glazen shelves kept watch
> Matthew and Waldo, guardians of the faith,
> The army of unalterable law.

This cynical squib in the Poundian manner (see Pound's "Les Millwins") is equally satiric of Nancy and her aunts, Arnold and Emerson ("guardians of the faith" indeed!), and it now feels to us as thoroughly "period" as does Cousin Nancy. But hear G&G get down to business:

> "Cousin Nancy" . . . frankly satirizes the specious modernity of the liberated Miss Nancy Ellicott, who not only "smoked / And danced all the modern dances" but also, as if to destroy the earth itself, "Strode across the hills and *broke* them" (emphasis ours). Even the poem's allusive conclusion implicitly censures this aggressive protoflapper . . . Though Eliot presents Matthew (Arnold) and Waldo (Emerson) ironically, as fragile "guardians of the faith," the fact that they are identified with the "army of unalterable law" which defeats "Prince Lucifer" in Meredith's "Lucifer in Starlight" suggests that Eliot sees the rebellious Nancy as a diabolical upstart whose breaking of nature (the hills) also threatens to break the grounds of culture.

Nancy, they go on to say—using the New English Academic's most favorite word—is "problematic."

I have never deeply cared for or bothered much with "Cousin Nancy," but now, seeing the havoc wreaked upon it by such "analysis," I begin to grow fond of it. G&G try hard to show that the poem is a major male putdown of Nancy, but they do this by foisting their own terminology on Eliot's presentation of her ("a diabolical upstart whose breaking of nature . . . also threatens to break the grounds of culture") as if that's what the poem in fact says. It never occurs to them, evidently, that the ringing line from Meredith might be used just as ironically as the poem's other materials, everything being grist for Eliot's satiric mill. For G&G are interested in "Cousin Nancy" only as an item to throw into the hopper, adding further to their point about the battle of the sexes. If the poem gets a bit ground up in the process, so be it.

The other notable instance of heavy artillery aggressively manned (as it were) by G&G, is their gloss on a line from W. D. Snodgrass' "April Inventory." In that poem (from *Heart's Needle*) Snodgrass—perhaps too satisfiedly—congratulates himself on the few things he's learned recently, one of which, *mirabile dictu*, was "to ease my woman till she came." Actually this line is followed by "To ease an old man who was dying," putting a little play on the word "ease." But G&G care only about the first easing, in fact it throws them into a fit of knowing solemnity:

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> On the surface, of course, Snodgrass's desire to "ease" his woman "so she came" seems notably generous. But actually such a construction of female desire ultimately implies female dependency: if a man does not "ease" her, Snodgrass suggests, the woman cannot come.

In the twinkling of an eye, we are launched into very deep and exciting waters indeed:

> In this regard, Freud's theory of woman as a "castrated" man was useful, for it implied a valorization of the implemental (sexual) utility of the penis (as opposed to the clitoris or vagina) which intensified a widespread cultural assumption of female passivity.

On we go to a lecture about further bad assumptions directed at "nymphomaniac" or "frigid" women who must be punished by "the penis . . . on the verge of turning from a therapeutic instrument in the domestication of desire" into "a penis as pistol, an instrument of rape or revenge." All that from Snodgrass' little boast, now pressed into service of the "metastory." Two pages later we have moved on to *A Streetcar Named Desire*, of which G&G seem to approve, not as far as I can see for anything in its language or artistic construction but for the way "the homosexual author . . . simultaneously records, rationalizes, and critiques the use of the penis as a weapon . . ." "Critiquing" the penis (and how much more official-sounding than merely criticizing it) clearly wins old Tennessee a raft of points, all the ones lost by Snodgrass.

Gilbert and Gubar are lively, but mainly humorless; they have no time for comedy since there are so many examples to be run through. But they do go into stitches, relatively speaking, over "an exceptionally funny short fantasy" by a science fiction writer named William Tenn who (in 1965) wrote "The Masculinist Revolt," in which angry men revive their virility by bringing back the codpiece. The hero, named P. Edward Pollyglow (also known as "Old Pep"), advertises his codpieces with the following slogan:

> MEN ARE DIFFERENT FROM WOMEN!
> Dress *differently*
> Dress *masculinist*!
> Wear Pollyglow Men's Jumpers
> With the *Special Pollyglow Codpiece*!
> And join the masculinist club!

G&G think this hilarious but see nothing the least bit funny in a poem ("Letter from Chicago") written by May Sarton in 1953 about what Virginia Woolf's death had meant to her: "Here where you never were, they said, / 'Virginia Woolf is dead' / The city died. I

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died in the city," Sarton writes, and proceeds to note that "yesterday I found you," "I speak to you and meet my own," and "I send you love forward into the past." The point about these sadly inept lines, if we hadn't already guessed, is that "Sarton's gesture of amorous salutation is an exemplary one for many modernist women of letters" who want to throw themselves "into the arms of powerfully aesthetic foremothers." It matters not a whit that there's nothing the least "modernist"—not to say aesthetic—about Sarton's attempt at a poem, so long as it can provide another exemplary block in the metastory.

A voice from within now accuses me of fussiness, nit-picking, of neglecting the book's larger argument in favor of local disagreements; of being insufficiently appreciative of the way (in J. Hillis Miller's cover blurb) it "rewrite[s] the history of modernism." That argument, or overview, emphasizes the violence twentieth-century male writers directed at women and how the women fought back, looked for their foremothers, made the historic effort (in G&G's words) "to come to terms with the urgent need for female literary authority through fantasies about the possession of a mother tongue." In fact, I don't at all object to the "overview" as a provocative and—on inspection of much evidence dug out of the works themselves—a justifiable line to take. Gender strife is the real thing and, insofar as it motivates or enlivens the "organized violence upon language" Frost said made up poetry, is even the real right thing. After all, nothing exciting happens in literature when amity, mutual respect, and peaceful commerce obtain between the sexes—as if literature were someone's liberal ideal of a coeducational college campus.

Another cover blurb, this one from Joyce Carol Oates, warns me that "Male readers and critics will ignore it at their own peril." As far as I can tell, I am not taking a negative line about the enterprise because of my identity as a *male* reader and critic; it's rather that as a male *reader and critic* I'm unhappy with what, too often, these female critics make of their chosen texts. For whenever the language of the work in question is delicate and complicated in its figure, that work—often a poem—suffers from their treatment. Pound's quite distinctive "Portrait d'une Femme," we are told,

> implies that woman is herself botched. Asserting that "Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea," he defines her as both the debris and the destroyer of a shipwrecked civilization: her "Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things, / Strange spars of knowledge" are not fragments she has shored against her ruins; rather, they represent the ruinousness of a mind replete with "Nothing that's quite [her] own."

I can only say in response to this that it is hopelessly mangling of

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the poem's tone and atmosphere, and that the *Waste Land* allusion is no help. Among other things, Pound's portrait is witty and slightly rueful, not to say rhythmically interesting; but "rhythm" is not something these metastorytellers care overmuch about.

Rather, their aggressive eagerness as readers propels them into claims you wish they would reconsider, like this one about the end of Elizabeth Bishop's "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore":

> Come like a light in the white mackerel sky,
> come like a daytime comet
> with a long unnebulous train of words,
> from Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning,
> please come flying.

One may be charmed or not so charmed by the poem, but have you thought of it in such terms as G&G propose?

> Indeed, the consummation Bishop devoutly wishes to achieve in her confrontation with this woman artist seems not only erotic but also apocalyptic: erotic because Bishop envisions Moore "com-[ing]" and "mounting" the "white mackerel sky / . . . like a daytime comet," apocalyptic because Moore's "com[ing]" and "mounting" herald what Adrienne Rich calls "a whole new poetry beginning here."

I won't comment on this except to say that to "envision" Marianne Moore in this erotic/apocalyptic way may be something Adrienne Rich might do, or approve of, but surely ruins the fairy-tale whimsy of Bishop's concluding plea to her mentor.

This first volume of the trilogy shows incontestably that Gilbert and Gubar know exactly what they want to demonstrate about the battle of the sexes in our century and that there is nothing likely to stand in their way of demonstrating it. Certainly not literature, which can be beaten into shape, its rough edges or ambiguous tones ironed out through rewordings into a metastory such as we have here. The question is whether such rewordings are strenuously to be avoided. John Carey, for one, thought so when in his inaugural lecture as Merton Professor of Literature at Oxford (titled "The Critic as Vandal") he called it "a paramount duty of the literary critic not merely not to reword himself, but to contest and discredit all rewordings fabricated by other critics, demonstrating their inadequacy and destructiveness."[3] If this is being, in effect, an anti-critic, it will at least—in Carey's further words—"bear witness to the fact that literature is irreplaceable, irreducible and irrefutable, and quite distinct in its mode of being from literary criticism." But I suspect this is a fact over which the authors of *No Man's Land* aren't going to lose much sleep.

[3] John Carey, "The Critic as Vandal," *New Statesman*, 6 August 1978.

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HAROLD FROMM

Nervous Rapprochements

THAT HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS HAS DONE UP Gertrude Himmelfarb's new collection in noteworthy style—elegant dust jacket, handsome binding, heavyweight antique-white paper, attractive typefaces, and at a relatively low price for a university press hardbound—all of this is saying something, and what it says to me is that this is a gesture of mediation between the academy and the outside world. It is one way, at any rate, of responding to the perennially bothersome question, Who will oversee the overseers? For if our intellectual life has indeed been taken over by the academy, and if what the Marxists say about power and self-interest is really true ("hegemony," in the lingo of the pros), then all the more reason for the ordinary, general, or common reader to be given as many encouragements as possible to keep tabs on the guardians of our culture.

But who *is* the ordinary, general, or common reader, a species much alluded to though rarely identified? In the present instance, at least, the answer may seem somewhat surprising: the common reader, c'est moi. For despite years as a literary academic, when I approach work in other disciplines I am in the position of general reader. And in this case, such a role is exactly right, since it is for my benefit rather than that of Professor Himmelfarb's colleagues that a book like this is produced (though she would have no objection to her colleagues absorbing its message). And as prolegomena to some future expansion upon this subject, I would also say that I think a rather large number of people fall into this class: intellectuals, artists, academics, perennial students, etc. who read in areas other than those of their professional interests. They may very well constitute a major portion of today's common readers.

In order to have common readers, however, what is also needed are "common" writers, and as I pointed out about a year ago in this journal, it is widely believed that the Man of Letters who wrote for a general educated audience is verging on extinction. Nevertheless, in discussing V. S. Pritchett's essays, I protested that such persons were by no means to be written off entirely as a species, and I enumerated a small list of notable survivors. Although the traditional Man of Letters was usually considered to be a non-academic literary journalist who wrote regularly for relatively popular media and could more or less earn a living by doing so, today's new-class (as Alvin Gouldner might have called them) descendants must also be

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seen as including specialist academics who are not too supercilious to write for a general audience. And when these writers are admitted, we find ourselves with a very thriving enterprise: the science essays of physicist Jeremy Bernstein, the *sui-generis* essays of biologist Lewis Thomas, the poetry essays of Helen Vendler, the literary-political essays of Richard Ohmann, the cultural essays of Frederick Crews and Gerald Graff, even some of the essays of Terry Eagleton and Stanley Fish (two masters indeed, when they can manage to tranquillize their half-crazed hobby horses). To this easily expandable list must also be added Gertrude Himmelfarb.

The central subject of *The New History and the Old*[1] is the internal division of historians into groups of scholars with opposing methodologies, and the differing systems of values that accompany them. The new history

> encompasses a variety of subjects and methods, some of which are mutually exclusive. Yet there are characteristics that unite it, and even more that differentiate it from the old history. Thus the new history tends to be analytic rather than narrative, thematic rather than chronological. It relies more upon statistical tables, oral interviews, sociological models, and psychoanalytic theories than upon constitutions, treaties, parliamentary debates, political writings, or party manifestos. Where the old history typically concerns itself with regimes and administrations, legislation and politics, diplomacy and foreign policy, wars and revolutions, the new history focuses on classes and ethnic groups, social problems and institutions, cities and communities, work and play, family and sex, birth and death, childhood and old age, crime and insanity. Where the old features kings, presidents, politicians, leaders, political theorists, the new takes as its subject the "anonymous masses." The old is "history from above," "elitist history," as is now said; the new is "history from below," "populist history."

This "new" history frequently *distrusts* the familiar narrative strategies because it sees them as "storytelling" while regarding the old historian as too shaping a force in the production of his or her "story." At its extreme—quantohistory—the new history tries to rely on statistics derived from public documents like parish registers and slaveholders' records, avoiding narrative as much as possible. Psychohistory applies the insights of Freud to past behavior, while *mentalité* history tries to account for the past in terms of the dominant beliefs of the masses. What they share is an attraction to the sociological and a distrust of the representativeness of political events. Sometimes, they distrust the whole notion of events altogether.

[1]THE NEW HISTORY AND THE OLD, by *Gertrude Himmelfarb*. The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press. $20.00.

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The running theme of Himmelfarb's book is not her blanket objection to these various methodologies so much as her refusal to acknowledge their validity as totalizing, monolithic accounts of the past. "Again and again," she remarks in her introduction, "I make the point that the issue is not the new history as such but rather the decisive role it has assumed and the superior claims made on its behalf." As a nineteenth century specialist who has written large works on Darwin as well as on the poor in England during the industrial revolution, she particularly turns her attention to various new-historical specimens that address Victorian issues, although she also ranges elsewhere. For example, in a chapter dealing with *Time on the Cross*, by Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, a quantomethodical treatment of American slavery, she objects when such a method "is not merely the *occasional* use of figures . . . [but when] it is the *systematic*, *comprehensive* use of figures in such a way as to exclude or belittle all other kinds of data" [my emphasis]. "But if we can restore to the monograph [i.e. a long essay with a carefully limited focus] the respect it once enjoyed, we might find that many works of quantohistory fall into this category. They are concerned not with the whole of a historical situation but with a part of it, a particular aspect or problem. Eventually their quantitative findings will be absorbed" into larger and more global histories.

As an instance of psychohistory, she deals with Bruce Mazlish's *James and John Stuart Mill*, pointing out that Mazlish is not deterred from psychoanalyzing his subjects even though he explicitly acknowledges how little solid factual material there is to work on. She quotes him on James Mill's shoemaker father: "We know nothing of what influence he may have had on his son. We do not even know whether he was typical of the shoemakers, as I have described them." Then, after noting that Mazlish nevertheless concludes that "the father seems to be nonexistent as a formative influence in James' life," Himmelfarb hurls her hand grenade: "This is not quite accurate either, since it is only the evidence that is nonexistent." And as *coup de grâce* she adds: "Perhaps because more is known about the mother, Mazlish sees her as the dominant influence on her son." In one of the most amusing of quotations, she reproduces a passage from his study of Nixon, in which Mazlish remarks: "Psychoanalysis differs from history in one fundamental way. It claims to have a scientific system of concepts, based on clinical data. This claim I accept." Though comment may seem superfluous, she adds: "He is not discouraged by the discovery that the 'first thing' that strikes a student of Nixon, for example, is the 'paucity of information' about him, especially about those periods of his life that are most crucial for the psychohistorian. For Mazlish the paucity of biographical information is compensated by the certitude of psychoanalytic information."

Of *mentalité* history she remarks, with similar dissatisfaction about

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scarcity of evidence, that it "has a penchant for subjects that, by definition, produce few such records [as the political, institutional, diplomatic, intellectual ones of the 'old' history]; the 'states of mind' of the 'inarticulate masses' are too subtle and private to lend themselves to the kind of evidence that survives the ages."

Himmelfarb's repeated criticism of the varieties of new history that she sees as dominating the academy is that they provide useful methodologies that could contribute to a more totalizing history, if only they would stop offering themselves up as the whole story. But she insists that their distrust of the subjectivity of traditional narrative history is unfounded, because their own sources of "facts" (statistics, "mentalities," psychobiographies) require a hermeneutic that is equally subjective, insofar as nothing interprets itself. In place of the sociological imagination (or lack of it) that has reduced history to atomized data, Himmelfarb recalls Lionel Trilling's "moral imagination," a term which he used in the forties to castigate the narrowly political "liberal imagination" of his intellectual contemporaries. Although, like Trilling, she is herself rather ambiguous on this subject (and the "moral imagination" remains a somewhat nebulous entity), what she finds defective in today's "positivist" mentality is its abandonment of values and its pretense of neutrality and fairness. With the growing awareness of the pervasiveness of narrativity as a component of all knowing, a subject now much-discussed in literary studies, Himmelfarb is by no means alone in her stance that it is virtually impossible for the historian to avoid telling a story.

Gertrude Himmelfarb's prose in these essays is a model of clarity and ironic urbanity, even if all the essays are not equally effective as stand-alone units or as parts of a whole. Some have structural problems because of their provenance as reassembled reviews, and others repeat ideas that have already been discussed. A few, however, like the one on "The Group," i.e. the British Marxist historians, are especially fine. But it is a curious phenomenon of the humanities-wide split between conservative and radical scholars that the vanguard writers, professedly devoted to "history from below," "mass culture," populism, Marxian proletarianism, etc., are the ones most likely to communicate their egalitarian visions in cultish, elitist, specialized prose, accessible only to other meritocrats, while "high culture" conservatives are apt to engage in variants of classic plain-speaking. Perhaps it is the association of lucid and self-confident plain speech with an aristocratic and privileged ruling class whom they wish to supplant (not merely overturn) that has ironically lured today's vanguard scholars into their jargon of inauthenticity.

However that may be, the tensions between these two camps—and the two generations into which they are frequently split—are evident throughout Himmelfarb's book. In speaking of the "new" historians, she refers to herself as a "crotchety old historian" who would supposedly "throw a damper on the festivities" and she com-

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plains of the disciples and epigones of the more distinguished new historians, by which I take her to mean the graduate students who have been trained in only one mode of history and who now lack the flexibility to make use of varied approaches. "The 'quantitative literacy' they pride themselves on, and find deplorably lacking in other historians, is all too often acquired at the expense of ordinary literacy—indeed, often requires the suspension of verbal discourse." But she has high praise for Lawrence Stone, one of the fathers of the new history, a praise that recurs throughout her book, particularly since "he seems to suspect that the brave heresy of his youth has degenerated into a mindless orthodoxy, and that some of his precocious children have grown into swaggering, blustering adults." She is especially pleased to be able to quote him as saying that "it might be time for the historical rats to leave rather than to scramble aboard the social scientific ship which seems to be leaking and undergoing major repair." But though she strongly appreciates what he personally has accomplished as a new historian, every now and then a nervous solicitude forces itself to the surface. "And here, unfortunately, Stone joins the pack, deriding 'traditional intellectual history' as a 'kind of paper-chase of ideas back through the ages' . . . This is a bit of philistinism unworthy (and untypical) of Stone."

Since Stone himself has reviewed *The New History and the Old* (in the December 17, 1987 issue of the *New York Review of Books*), no great divinatory powers are required to learn how he feels about Himmelfarb. Praising her book as "passionately written" and "intelligent" in its "stylish prose, its intellectual brilliance, and its polemical force," describing her "deep moral and philosophic convictions" as those of the forties liberals "traumatized by the struggle against dogmatic Marxism," he concedes a large quantity of her objections to the new history while repeatedly accusing her of overstating her case, "as if the new history were a major threat not only to history but to the intellectual foundations of Western civilization." Nonetheless, he alludes to a remark by the editor of the *Journal of Social History*, twice-quoted by Himmelfarb, that "when the history of menarche is widely recognized as equal in importance to the history of monarchy, we will have arrived," in order to note that "to Professor Himmelfarb (and indeed to me) observations such as these are like red rags to a bull," and he also agrees with her "devastating critique" of the psychohistorical books by Bruce Mazlish described above. Then he wonders whether Himmelfarb is, after all, just a disgruntled cold-war liberal, while he goes on to summarize the considerable achievements of the "golden age" of the new history, after which he reflects that "if we remove the excited rhetoric and exaggeration, there is a considerable amount of truth in what Professor Himmelfarb has to say." But this does not prevent him from pointing out that her criticisms are a little out of date, because "the new social history and the old political history are already coming

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together." And so on. What results is a paradigmatic model of a first-rate reviewer displaying the dialectic of his own mind, while doing considerable justice to his subject.

I must admit that this debate pleases me greatly as a nervous rapprochement between two mighty opposites who admire each other's work but whose hands are nonetheless always at the ready on their scabbards. Such continuing and exquisite accommodation is much to be preferred to the widespread cheerleading and boosterism that are an everyday feature of party politics in the humanities. In a similar vein, it is good to learn from Catharine Stimpson that "feminism" appears to be breaking up into "feminisms," with much internal squabbling, while Susan Gubar's recent essay (like Stimpson's, in *Critical Inquiry*) about pornography and attempts at its repression through censorship is an encouraging portent of increasingly sensitive feminist awareness of the tensions between legal restraints and freedom of expression. The unbuttoned debate in *New Literary History* between a little-known black woman scholar and two black male academic superstars who regularly blow each other's trumpet puts black studies in a somewhat new and intriguing light. And the veritable streetfighting rumble about patriarchy and feminism between Gilbert & Gubar and Frank Lentricchia (*Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1988) is bound to generate variegated new shoots from all the scattered droplets of blood remaining on the ground. Better this internecine warfare than the terrorism of Deconstruction that has been running the show for some time now and been given autoerotic benediction in J. Hillis Miller's 1986 presidential address to the MLA.

Although the common reader cannot be expected to follow all of these academic turns and counterturns with rapt attention, and even though the issues involved sometimes lack the grander cultural resonances to be found in the writings of Edmund Wilson or Lionel Trilling, many of these controversies do reflect and report on the major ethical and cultural questions of our era, questions that redound upon the day-to-day operations of the larger society. This is particularly the case right now, when our universities seem more overtly politicized than they have ever been. Allan Bloom, Sandra Gilbert, Fredric Jameson, Edward Said, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Stanley Fish, Hillis Miller, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Eugene Genovese, Noam Chomsky, Glenn Loury—all of these represent warring constituencies in the academic community, whose decisions have practical consequences. If it is true that today's life of the mind has been entrusted to or taken over by such academics, and if the large Victorian mass of modestly educated common readers who devoured Dickens and Trollope is now supplanted by a different mass of highly-educated professionals who also function, outside their specialties, as common readers, then we need to encourage academic specialists to descend occasionally from their bemused Parnassus

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to bring The Word to these other intelligent people, many of whom may actually be invisible colleagues. And if the soil in which the old-time Man of Letters flourished is in fact now worn out, then the new hydroponic Person of Letters must be accommodated to take his place and to foster nervous rapprochements between Polis and Parnassus. University presses must be encouraged to continue publishing books for general audiences. Specialist scholars must be derided as anti-social and reactionary for looking down their noses at colleagues whom they dismiss as "popularizers." In other words, the immense gap that exists between academic high culture and popular culture cannot simply be left to chance or whim, because the experts can only be depended upon to look first to their own specialist interests.

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DENNIS SAMPSON

Poetry Chronicle

KARL SHAPIRO, WHOSE SECOND VOLUME OF VERSE, *V-Letter and Other Poems*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1945, has pretty much remained outside the arena of popular poetry for two decades. His recent retrospective,[1] a judicious selection of his poetry since 1940, includes all of his more widely anthologized pieces, "Auto Wreck," "The Fly," "V-letter," "The Progress of Faust," and "Buick," as well as several newer poems and work known only to those who have closely followed Shapiro's career. Shapiro has always been somewhat of an enigma to contemporary poets and critics. As a formalist, his poetry appeared out of fashion in the late sixties, despite the publication of *The Bourgeois Poet*, free-verse rantings that should have endeared him to the beat poets but didn't. Because of his refusal to recommend Ezra Pound for the Bollingen prize, he incurred the disdain of his peers: Pound's anti-Semitic poetry and his radio broadcasts during the Second World War were understandably repulsive to Shapiro, who has written as insightfully of the Jewish predicament as any poet in America and who has used his Jewishness and the subsequent alienation the Jew feels as a touchstone for nearly all his work.

Shapiro has consistently thought of himself as the outsider, "a tower of bitterness" as he says in "Poet," suspicious of those who would include him in their literary circle and bitterly denouncing the ineffectual academic life, where the "Old Guard sits in judgement and wears ties, / Eyeing the New in proletarian drag, / Where the Assistant with one lowered eyelid / Plots against tenure." As a poet who will never be accepted or fully understood by the public, as a Jew, born into a world inexplicably distrustful of him, and as a man for whom God is irritatingly mysterious, Shapiro stands as the quintessential American exile.

In the lovely "Travelogue for Exiles," published over forty years ago, the poet dismisses heaven, "the terminus of prayer," as a possible refuge for displaced man. Of earth he says,

> Look and remember. Look upon this land,
> Far, far across the pastures and the grass.
> Surely, there, surely, they will let you pass.
> Speak then and ask the forest and the loam.
> What do you hear? What does the land command?
> *The earth is taken: this is not your home.*

[1]NEW AND SELECTED POEMS: 1940–86, by *Karl Shapiro*. University of Chicago Press. $9.95p.

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Determinedly at odds with the powers-that-be, Shapiro can be delightfully acerbic at times, though his diatribes in syllabic verse can grate. At his best is the Shapiro of the love poems and the poems where the moral import of an event is conveyed with precision. "Adam and Eve" recounts the fall from grace of those recalcitrant lovers, in a style reminiscent of Dante—both for its lucid rendering of mythological figures and for its rhythm. In the third section of this seven-part poem, Adam and Eve become aware of their own sentience. After the first two exploratory kisses,

> Some obscure angel, pausing on his course,
> Shed such a brightness on the face of Eve
> That Adam in grief was ready to believe
> He had lost her. The third kiss was by force.
>
> . . . . . .
> . . . So wide
> Their mouths, they drank each other from inside.
> A gland of honey burst within their throats.

Adam's longing for companionship is assuaged; Eve learns of the knowledge of good and evil ("The spirit of the tree . . . stood / Straight as a standing-stone, and spilled its seed"); the final section, entitled "Exile," has Adam speaking indignantly to God, the "Father, who made the garden pall, / Giving me all things and then taking all." In a poem of the same period, "The Synagogue," from *Person, Place, or Thing*, Shapiro echoes this sentiment ("For faith He gave us land and took the land, / Making us exiles of all humankind"), while the widely praised "The Progress of Faust" contemporizes the familiar legend of one who makes a pact with the devil, in a perfectly metrical poem that has Faust appearing at the age of 439 "In an American desert at war's end / Where, at his back, a dome of atoms rose." This is a tragi-comic masterpiece that stings.

Of the newer poems, only a few draw directly on Shapiro as a formalist; the concision is still there, as is his wit and cynicism, but meter and rhyme have frequently been abandoned and his mocking self-effacement (Shapiro is seldom harder on anyone than himself) is tempered with humility and a kind of childlike awe. Visits to the gravesites of Hiram Ulysses Grant and W. H. Auden are the occasions for poems, intimating a desire to put aside his quarrels with the world for a while so that he may, however peripherally, come to terms with the fact of his own mortality.

As with the Arnold of "Dover Beach," the saving grace for this poet, exiled in as many ways as he seems to be, is love of man for woman. All Shapiro's love poems are beautifully conceived, testaments to his artistry and greatness of heart. In his shortest poem to date, "The Pigeons," the writer sees two pigeons on the ledge far above the street, "In the denouement of the beautiful storm." No-

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ticing their reflection in the window, he wonders about their appearance there:

> Is that why they were here
> Or were they blown by chance, these doves,
> Into a momentary conjunction
> By some maker's dream?

This collection charts the spiritual progress of a querulous and compassionate man.

Howard Nemerov probably has more in common with Karl Shapiro than any other modern poet. A veteran pilot of the Second World War, a Jew who has made his living in the university, poet of the same generation of writers as Wilbur, Shapiro, and Lowell, Nemerov can be witty, graceful, and urbane. His new book[2] is broken down into three sections.

Of the forty-six poems here, there are over a dozen that are truly memorable. Most are private reflections on the domestic life or the natural world, the poet alone, looking clearly at his subject and saying nothing more than is necessary. Seeing light cast across the winter robe on his chair, the poet, in "Night Piece," tries to remember the name of a particular painter:

> Murillo . . . Velázquez . . . something beginning in V?
> No, neither of those, though he was coming close,
> Till a door slid open and told him Zurbarán
> And he smiled for happiness and fell asleep.

The grace with which he catches the serpentine movement of a mind on the verge of revelation is remarkable here, and the deft connection made between the twentieth-century poet and the seventeenth-century artist Zurbarán, noted for his religious paintings, comes close to redefining what contemporary lyricism can achieve.

The middle section of *War Stories* is dedicated to reminiscences of Nemerov's experience as a pilot during the war. For the most part, he avoids polemicism and discursiveness, easy tempters, reiterating a theme announced at the book's beginning: "The reason we do not learn from history is / Because we are not the people who learned last time." The poems in this middle section are all good, though not, I think, as Karl Shapiro has stated on the jacket cover, poems "that will take their place among the best of that genre." Nemerov is mainly driven to remember here, in an effort to make some sense of his involvement in the war. Especially good is "The Shadow Side," about widowhood resulting from the loss of a husband in the war. After the widow's room has begun to darken, the "silver service that her father sent" disappears in the growing gloom

[2] WAR STORIES, by *Howard Nemerov*. University of Chicago Press. $10.95p.

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Until it is full night and the new-made widow
Remains unmoved and dark and derelict
In the museum of wreckage and regret
Left of a life subjected to earth's shadow.

Nemerov's sometimes irrepressible tendency to reflect on matters of dubious interest is still in evidence in this volume. Although he can satirize with éclat and dissect inanities with biting humor, one finds this side of his work to be finally less valuable than that aspect of his vision whereby subjects are rendered intimately and don't require laughter or agreement or applause as a response.

One should read *War Stories* for the dozen or so lyric poems that have him working at the peak of his powers, where the temptation to be flip or ribald is suppressed. "A Christmas Card of Halley's Comet" is particularly pleasing for its attempt to do what Nemerov does so well (and too infrequently), the description of physical movement of some kind. In an unrhymed sonnet, "To Dante," Nemerov admits his envy of Dante for having written "an epic with an all-star cast," finishing "all that up / By falling asleep in the divine mind / And disremembering everything at once." The final lines convey the underlying sentiment of all his stronger poems in a couplet that makes me think of Pascal's "infinite spaces," of Shelley's description of life as "one long pant":

How lonely, though, between eternities,
The long way down, and up, and over and out.

Nobody writes poetry quite like May Swenson anymore. She is a genuine anomaly: mischievous, inquisitive in the extreme, and totally given over to the task of witnessing the physical world. In "Goodbye, Goldeneye" from this,[3] her first poetry collection since *New & and Selected Things Taking Place*, she mourns the intrusion of rude humanity on one of her favorite haunts, the shore facing the ocean:

So, goodbye, goldeneye, and grebe and scaup and loon.
Goodbye, morning walks beside the tide tinkling

among clean pebbles, blue mussel shells and snail
shells that look like staring eyeballs. Goodbye,
kingfisher, little green, black crowned heron,

snowy egret. And, goodbye, oh faithful pair of
swans that used to glide—god and goddess
shapes of purity—over the wide water.

Swenson's remorse is genuine, as is her deep and abiding fondness

[3]IN OTHER WORDS, by *May Swenson*. Alfred A. Knopf. $16.95.

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for all living creatures. Her most obvious precursor is Marianne Moore. Unlike Moore, she rarely makes literary allusions (she does have a fine poem here addressed to Elizabeth Bishop upon hearing of her death), yet she shares Moore's enthusiasm for detail, especially as it pertains to nature.

Never solemn or self-indulgent, eschewing the big finale, Swenson is intent on noticing everything around her while preferring herself to remain in the wings. Sometimes she subjugates the self to such an extent that it may seem on the verge of disappearing altogether from the poem. But her language is so sensuous and her eye so exacting, one instead comes away from her writing feeling one has been in the presence of a mind as comprehensive as Darwin's, as chimerical as Herbert's or Dickinson's, as felicitous as Donne's. When the self does emerge, the effect can be fairly startling, as in "A New Pair," where presumably two swans are being described. Near the end of the poem she says,

> One tall neck dips, is laid along the other's back,
> at the place where an arm would embrace.
>
> A brief caress. Then both sinuous necks arise,
> their paddle feet fall to water. As I stare,
> with independent purpose at full sail, they steer apart.

A person from another planet reading her poetry might believe there were no wars on Earth and that death and the postmortem realm do not receive here the kind of attention we in fact spend on them. Only infrequently do we get to see the darker side of Swenson, as in this passage from an otherwise unsuccessful poem about the recent space shuttle catastrophe:

> One morning, on the beach near Canaveral, a navy blue sock
> washed up. In it, a fragment of bone and human tissue.
> Evidence without connection . . .

And in the penultimate stanza of "In Florida," having provided the reader with a lush description of the landscape, she pans in on a litter of kittens underneath the porch:

> To behold the tableau, get on your knees,
> put an eye to the widest crack between boards, where Polar
> in the half-dark with her brood patiently endures.

Other poems experiment with shape, there is a quirky novel of four pages written in verse, a mock prose-poem of some length—yet no matter where you open this book you find the authentic voice of the poet, unashamedly translating the world.

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Ruth Stone's new and selected[4] begins with more recent poems and works backward in time to her first volume of verse. A better view of her development as a writer is had if the book is read from back to front, for we see her struggling against formalism, a task she is fortunately unable to accomplish completely. Stone is a marvelous lyric poet. The harder realities of life, miscarriages, the birth of children and their departure from home, the death of loved ones, unwanted solitude and the eccentricities of late middle age have all been conferred on poem after poem. Of her dead husband (he figures prominently in the book) she says, "We are balanced like dancers in memory, / I feel your coat, I smell your clothes, / Your tobacco; you almost touch me."

Now and then a poem will falter, usually when she endeavors to get as far away as possible from traditional prosody ("Message from Your Toes"), and poems of hers that lack a fully realized subject too are often reduced to being simply an emotion on the page, as when she decides to stand up for the rights of women or against the infuriating narrow-mindedness of men. Generally though, Stone is fair in her treatment of her subjects. At the very least, she is a survivor; at the most, she articulates, in poems where colloquial and poetic diction go hand in hand, the transcendent spirit of one who has suffered more than most:

> Consider the infinite anguish of this insanity;
> Only in the impossible are we transformed to artifact.

The wisdom that is supposed to come with age is nowhere apparent in Allen Ginsberg's new book;[5] one looks in vain for the profundity of statement one finds in the later works of other writers. The poet to whom Ginsberg has always felt closest is, of course, Walt Whitman, yet where Whitman created an all-embracing and protean self in his poems, Ginsberg has given us a personality and a name. "Who is this Slave Master makes / me answer letters in his name" he complains in "I'm a Prisoner of Allen Ginsberg." Finicky, bored, beleagured by infirmities and—above all else—obsessed with his sexuality and the body's secretions, we get Allen Ginsberg *in toto* in this book. The ludicrous "What You Up To?" begins

> "Oh just hanging around
> picking my nose . . ."
> I replied, embarrassed . . .
>
> What must he think my genius,

[4]SECOND-HAND COAT: New and Selected Poems, by *Ruth Stone*. David R. Godine. $10.95p.

[5]WHITE SHROUD: Poems 1980–1985, by *Allen Ginsberg*. Perennial Library/ Harper & Row. $8.95p.

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a large red blob on my
index finger tip—

and concludes with an appalling passage detailing a sexual encounter with a boy in a two-piece suit: "he fucked me naked in the ass / till I smelled brown excrement / staining his cock." When Whitman said "Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" I don't think he quite had this in mind. Although Ginsberg frequently professes his reverence for the human creature ("Reader, Hearer, this time Understand / How kind it is to love a man"), his macabre descriptions of sexual intercourse are so lacking in tenderness as to serve the opposite purpose.

The figure of William Carlos Williams also presides over these poems, whose dictatorial insistence on "no ideas but in things" has always been taken very much to heart by this writer. Where Williams was able to marry subject matter and form, Ginsberg has difficulty getting the two to mesh, for it is the image which brings these two together successfully, and many of Ginsberg's images seem arbitrary and therefore unrelated to the subject.

There are the usual long incantatory pieces, poems put to music (scores accompany some of the compositions), haikus capturing moments in the life—these are best, since they don't give Ginsberg the opportunity to digress, nor do they exhibit the tendency to indulge in the erotic. At the end of the title poem, the poet does manage to rise above his preoccupation with himself and show he is capable of writing at a very high level:

And when the ink ran out of my pen, and rosy violet
illumined city treetop skies above the Flatiron Front Range,
I went downstairs to the shady living room, where Peter Orlovsky
sat with long hair lit by television glow to watch
the sunrise weather news, I kissed him & filled my pen and wept.

And in "After Antipater" he ponders some of the more memorable events in his life, ending with a passage hinting at Stevens' "Martial Cadenza," a touching expression of reverence and awe for what Schopenhauer called "life's delicate child":

But when you lay on my bed, white sheet covering your
loins, your eyes on mine
I forgot these marvels, my heart breathed open, I saw
life's glory look back at me naked.

"Find out the Buddha, enter the great silence / & pass thru the needle's eye, / then come back happy," Ginsberg quietly asserts in a passage reminding one of Pound's "great acorn of light." Such writing shows the rewards of his lingering association with Oriental

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mysticism and points to a desire to reach for something higher than what we get from most of these poems.

If Allen Ginsberg no longer chooses to speak for a generation of beginning mystics, Cid Corman in *And the Word*[6] appears eager to endure as a solitary representative of the Eastern way of thinking in America—or not thinking, as is the case here. His brief poems have been so stripped of their concealments that all that is left is a persona groping toward enlightenment.

There is much goodwill in these haiku-like poems, and my eagerness to accept the speaking voice was revived again and again, as I read through the book—but finally the temptation to lecture, sotto voce, as if reminding the reader that he or she is not privy to certain information, as well as the banality of many of the insights at the end of the poems, left me feeling frustrated in my attempt to like Corman's writing. Here is a representative example:

Someone has to win
the lottery. O Lord—
let it not be me!

This is the trouble
with the poet who
prays for poverty—

who wouldn't buy a
ticket to the hall
of fame and only

sneaks into the old
Abbey to see where
a friend is buried.

Poems that set out to establish humility and abstinence as preeminent virtues usually accomplish just the opposite: the poet comes off sounding pompous and self-righteous.

The danger in composing poems whose language has been pruned so that not even a semblance of a story line remains is that the reader must constantly decide if the speaking voice is convincing enough to be believed. Corman has retained meter in his poetry and, despite the various affectations apparent in modeling poems after the Japanese masters, this vestige of formalism does not help lend credibility. He is most believable when he appears to have no ulterior motive in mind:

Like a child again

[6]AND THE WORD, by *Cid Corman*. Coffee House Press. $8.95p.

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holding a round stone
in my hand until

the warmth of my hand
warms the stone and I
feel comprehended.

And he is most engaging when he puts off posturing and directly addresses his subject, without the determination to moralize, as in the poem "Enuresis." Coffee House Press has done a fine job of producing this volume, and it must be said to Corman's credit, who perhaps has inured himself to this kind of criticism, that his effort to cleanse the doors of perception and present the soul and mind in all their nakedness is commendable—courageous even. One wishes the poems were better, though.

This chronicle concludes with a remarkably inventive third book[7] by Pattiann Rogers, *Legendary Performance*. The cast of characters here, as the jacket cover explains, exists "somewhere between reality and fantasy," and the sensibility at work is a cross between Virginia Woolf in *To The Lighthouse* and Samuel Beckett at his most painfully absurd. Rogers, in a mockingly playful tone, imagines a reality turned upside down, giving her curious participants permission to reflect on anything they wish. "Whenever Albert is bored," begins "The Pursuit As Solution," "he says he wants to know / What's on the other side of the mind." After that the romp is on. Among others, there is a violinist who plays too high to be heard, a splinter expert determined to exhaust every possibility that word implies, a woman in love with melancholia, and the recurring image of naked boys on horseback.

Despite the frivolous nature of these poems, there is something terrifying about the characters' obsession with the absurd in this imaginary realm where God has no place and the speculating mind knows no limits other than those imposed by the writer. This is a fantastical world Rogers has designed, where everything is possible, although not necessarily pleasurable thanks to the vaguely condescending and consistently gleeful tone of the narrator's voice. Perhaps others will find *Legendary Performance* to be ultimately more satisfying. The transforming power of the imagination is her major concern; and rather than simply stating this, she shows through application, as do other poets, that—in the words of Saint Augustine (he was describing God)—the figure the imagination makes is a circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere. And that is all to the good.

[7]LEGENDARY PERFORMANCE, by *Pattiann Rogers*. Ion Books/Raccoon. $9.95p.

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LIAM RECTOR

The Documentary of What Is

MUCH OF THE RECENT CHATTER ABOUT POETRY has centered upon "form" as it exists solely in the prosodic, technical sense, and the debate between the "new formalists" (nothing *new* there, really?) and "free verse" hounds us into the present. In a truly amusing inversion, it's now the formalists lobbing grenades into the foxholes of the free verse status quo. Oh, the pendulum . . . and beneath it, or to the side of it, real history. Whether one is working in received patterns which exist *a priori* to the composition of a poem, forms which are then adhered to, expanded upon, corrupted, tricked-out, or reinvented, or whether one composes "by field" in an "organic" grid of free verse "discoveries," what's most left out of this action and discussion is any sense of form as it exists in the dramatic movements of a given poem, as it exists in the subtext of form where words and their meanings move rhetorically, dramatically, as this might be discussed by novelists, playwrights, scriptwriters—dramatists of all stripes—in delineating the rise and fall of meaning as a matter of form.

As Donald Hall has contended, there will always be the debate between the constructivist and the expressionist modes of creating. It's borne out in *Death in Venice* as the argument between mathematics and passion, and most artists will shake down, fall at some point to one side or the other. And in terms of dramatic form (the classical arc of desire, complication, rising action, climax, and denouement, as one example) there will also be a necessary tension between the narrative and the lyric. Whether we are talking about narrative on one hand (the bone and movement of *sequence*, or what Seamus Heaney has called "the music of what happens") or lyric on the other (the sustained yelp occurring in one moment, looking to speak for All Moments, and in most cases engaging a *dramatic form*), in our best poems both narrative and lyric drives will push each other to their outermost limits, creating that third thing—the poem itself. *Four Quartets* is a superb example of this. Narrative takes many forms; our response to both the truth and the lie of "story" has made an elliptical narrative almost a precondition of our modernity, a physics of our perceptions, and it is in fact difficult *not* to engage narrative, where one word follows another. Lyricism, where it is also the relation between words in a poem, words bereft even of their meaning, is the necessary lifeblood flowing through the circulatory system of any sequential movement, where any engage-

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ment with the *materials* (language) is at hand. In between the narrative and the lyric falls, to corrupt Heaney, the documentary of what is.

What everyone is after here, as both writers and readers, is the powerful poem of truth, however it might be wrested down or received. I'm making no liberal plea for tolerance here, urging that we "celebrate" the "diversity" and give equal weight and honor to every aesthetic that happens to toddle down the pike, but I am suggesting that the best poems being written now engage form in a much wider synthesis than our current discussion and its cloistered terms allow for. "Let the dialectic be written in blood," said Trotsky, and I'll go along with that where the trench warfare, the mustard gas of contending aesthetics take their stand, but what's at stake here is the difference between the major poem that defines a time and the second order of stylists who hover about that poem, falling to one side or the other *of* it. Meanwhile a vast portion of the intelligent reading public takes a hike away from the shoptalk, in a dither of indifference . . .

Allen Ginsberg has argued that ours is now a time of revision rather than vision, as vision and prophecy were undoubtedly enacted in the "Howl" of the 1950s, and there's more than a grain of truth to that. The generation of poets now in their thirties, careening currently not so much towards the bop apocalypse as towards the vast revisions of middle age within an historical moment which is itself an impasse, cut their postwar teeth on the debate between formalism and free verse, and the books of poems I'll discuss here both profit and suffer from the revisions of the hysterical and extreme dramatic forms (God bless them) it has been our lot to inherit and move on with.

First, there's finally something *new* from New Directions. Not long ago I read every New Directions book I could get my hands on, needing no more than the sight of the publisher's name on the spine to recommend that a book be pulled from the shelf. All publishers lose mortal gas unless they make inroads into the coming generations, and in the last decade or so New Directions has primarily been known for the work it has printed from its fine backlist of authors, such as Hayden Carruth and Denise Levertov. It has fallen mainly to other publishers to take up the cudgel of introducing new and important work by young authors beginning to extend this or that tradition. Levertov provides the introduction to Jimmy Santiago Baca's new book, *Martin & Meditations on the South Valley*,[1] and the book is both in the lineage and ethos of what I take to be New Directions' history. It's also a powerful orchestration and revision of a narrative and lyrical admixture—both constructivist and expressionist in its execution—with an utterly compelling dramatic

[1]MARTIN & MEDITATIONS ON THE SOUTH VALLEY, by *Jimmy Santiago Baca*. New Directions. $19.95; $7.95.

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form fueling the entire vivisection and the pilgrim's progress which makes it so much more than another "collection" of poems.

Baca's book is a page-turner, almost a novel in verse, though its narrative is primarily elliptical (prodded structurally forth by the sectioning, the juxtaposition of poems, and the jump-cuts of time both presuppose). Its basic unit of construction is the sequence, poem by poem. I don't want to rehearse here the entire story and ruin its unfolding for the reader, but suffice to say that it is the story's masterful arc of dramatic form that commands both our emotional and our formal attentions. Martin, the orphaned protagonist, sets off on a journey that is studded with the particulars of his mestizo or "detribalized Apache" background, one which finally enacts a mythical rite which speaks to us all.

For many of the poets now in their thirties the word *memory* has become a kind of poetic buzzword, and memory is often the route travelled, the road deified, in their voyage towards meaning in poems. A romantic nostalgia (forever pumping the fog machine) weakens the decorative, essentially descriptive poems of many in this generation, where memory is no more than a whining, not a keening, about the passage into adulthood, the passage into complicity. But in poems such as Baca's and others I'll discuss here the loss of innocence is made specific, personal, grounded in tribe, class, and finally myth—*made* into a kind of depersonalized self-dramatization which, if it is romantic and betrays deep sentiment, is also very hard-boiled and without any *poseur* sentimentality. One innocence often remembered by this generation is the political/social innocence of coming to age amidst the Vietnam War and all it embodied of a civil war wherein family member was pitted against family member. Another most remembered (or most longed for) is characteristically the existence of the family itself, the mother and the father of it, before the "broken home" of the fifties became the "single-parent dwelling" of the eighties or no home, no family at all.

> Your departure uprooted me mother,
> hallowed core of a child
> your absence whittled down
> to a broken doll
> in a barn loft. The small burned area of memory,
> where your face is supposed to be,
> moons' rings pass through
> in broken chain of events
> in my dreams.

Martin's loss is an extreme one, and he travels to seek out friends of his parents to tell him who and how his parents were. In Martin's sojourn across the country we're made to feel that even within the genocidal colonization that established America it is now an America of émigrés who have all in effect orphaned themselves, moving

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in radical disjunction away from their parent/precursors. Martin's own history is poised within the roughage, the barely digestible:

> I was caught in the middle—
> between white skinned, English speaking altar boy
> at the communion railing,
> and brown skinned, Spanish speaking plains nomadic child
> with buffalo heart groaning underworld earth powers,
> between Sunday brunch at a restaurant
> and burritos eaten in a tin-roofed barn,
> between John Wayne on the afternoon movie
> rifle butting young Braves,
> and the Apache whose red dripping arrow
> was the altar candle in praise of the buck
> just killed.

Out of the collisions of these histories and absences Baca fashions the first movement of the book, "Martin," where a child passes from "field prey" to form eventually his own family and house, persons and a place he promises never to abandon.

"Meditations on the South Valley," the second movement in the book, is a further tale of breakdown and rebuilding, one in which Baca draws portraits of barrio life with great telescopic accuracy and poignance. This section meanders a bit and loses some of the compression that drove so convincingly the arc of the first section, but if there is a loss of through-line tension it is also an interlude before the book's triumphant climax. This is a book of abandonment and what people abandon themselves to—drink, the irresponsibility of incest, their own youths, and passivity—and it is also a book of great complicity, maturity, and finally responsibility. As Levertov says, it is a contemporary hero tale. The language fittingly flits from English to Spanish, seamlessly, and a useful glossary is provided at the end. The skills brought to the writing are likewise heroic, combining as they do both narrative and startling lyric talents, forging a form which supersedes any discussion of the craft brought to bear.

Andrew Hudgins' *After the Lost War*[2] follows quickly on the heels of his auspicious first book of poems, *Saints and Strangers*, published in 1985. The title poem of this second book was presaged in *Saints and Strangers*, and that shakedown cruise portended the livid lyricism and sure hand with drama that are everywhere present in *After the Lost War*. Hudgins' way with words then harked back somewhat to the early poems of James Dickey as they captured, almost in fever, the intonations and realities of the old and new South. In *After the Lost War*, Hudgins has extended those abilities, setting them into context with an act of deep ventriloquism, casting a history through the single, monologuing voice of the poet Sidney Lanier. Lanier was

[2]AFTER THE LOST WAR, by *Andrew Hudgins*. Houghton Mifflin. $12.50.

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born in 1842 and died in1881, of tuberculosis. Hudgins says in his preface that "the voice of these poems will be unfamiliar to anyone who knows the writings of this historical figure," and thanks Lanier for allowing him to use the facts of Lanier's life, "more or less," to see how Hudgins might himself have lived that life, had it been his. Hudgins also provides prose passages to set off sections of the book, dividing it into chronological sequences from which Hudgins departs and returns, passages which resonate well throughout the ensuing poems.

Here Hudgins literally rewrites the rules on how a book-length narrative can capture the spirit of a life and times. Hudgins has a talent for going after all the fireworks at once, yet here he sustains this long poem through a quieting of that impulse, instead working from and *within* the modesty and reservation of Lanier's voice. *Frank Bidart is our contemporary master of the dramatic monologue*, a veritable Greek dramatist, but here Hudgins shows how a drama might be built slowly, casting in the exposition deftly, digressing, and though there are rushes of intense lyricism, utter flights, the underlying tone is often one of quiet *aestivation*, one of Lanier's favorite words. Aestivation is the act of spending or passing the summer, often associated with a state of dormancy or torpor (aptly associated with the South and Lanier's illness), and Hudgins somehow lets the spirit of that state pass powerfully through this book without its ever resulting in an impasse or a dull moment.

Throughout shifts of locale, time, and circumstance, Lanier is there musing through beautifully rendered battle scenes, sickening and majestic in their detailed enaction, or idylling with his flute in his strenuous attempt to recover from what he'd seen and experienced of the Civil War and his internment as a prisoner of that war. His health was never the same, and a line that runs through the book is Lanier's coming to terms with his incapacities and his eventual early death. In fact, "with the younger generation of the South / after the lost war, pretty much / the whole of life has been not dying." Like Hiroshima victims not long ago in our American history, Lanier and the world of the defeated Confederate South are shell-shocked, death-immersed, and the afterlife of the event is played out in a key modulated by incessant wounds, memories, and the daily reminders of a diminished and diminishing mortality. Here Lanier making love with his wife, upon his return and a year after their wedding:

> As we made love, I saw, beyond her head,
> a swollen wasp pounce on a caterpillar
> and pump her eggs into its yellow skin.
> I had to keep my eyes open and watch:
> when I closed them the blanket's smell
> reminded me of Raven's broken cannon bone
> and how I knelt above the heaving mare

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and pulled the trigger and walked six miles to camp,
a saddle and the blanket on my shoulder.
Within a week they'll hatch into larvae
and eat the caterpillar from the inside out.

There is much to single out in this book, destined to become a kind of benchmark not only for its breadth but for its prosodic and dramatic integrity, but the most remarkable thing is how it abides within what it creates of the modesty of Lanier's voice, always in character, as that voice tells a simultaneous tale of a time when many died, one was dying, and an enduring love was sustained between Lanier and his wife. This excerpt from their last days together, when both knew Lanier's remaining time would not be long:

. . . sweat soaked her dark blue dress, and she
rode me as I would ride a horse I loved,
knowing the orders that I carried
were more important than the horse,
and knowing, too, it didn't matter
whether the flailed horse lived . . .

Paul Eluard once said, "And yet I have never found what I loved in what I write." Hudgins has now found that.

We're in a different vein altogether with Jane Miller's *American Odalisque*,[3] a book of poems which has about it a Frank O'Hara air of exuberance, mania, and a wide and encompassing net of associational *chutzpah*. Miller's subject is America and its movement, its people and their problematic romances; her tone is desire; and her mode is one of montage, accrual, and a fractured syntactical sense wherein syntax is forever shaking its money-maker. Within Miller's aesthetic, it is perhaps John Ashbery's work, among many other contemporaries mining this vein, which has taught us to read in this mode. Here all lines tend to have equal weight, equal priority, equal claim to the documentary similitudes of mind in our scattered and interrupted attentions. It is upon this surface (one in which closure counts for a great deal) that Jane Miller's work skates. Her work compares also to Ashbery's in its virtuosity of style, a virtuosity that most often evades any shapely dramatic form in favor of keeping everything afloat, tentative, discontinuous. These are poems in which energy and speed are everything, "an art out of a list of things loved," and that listing is yoked together by the lyrical intimacy of tone that Miller establishes with great verve in her best poems here. Her poetry is, as the old saw goes, a poetry of process, but what saves it from being merely "language-based" poetry is that it has a world within it to which the words refer *out*. Her alliance with mass culture is admirable—knowing and electric—and not

[3]AMERICAN ODALISQUE, by *Jane Miller*. Copper Canyon Press. $9.00p.

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marred by the snobbishness and predictable knee-jerk alienation one expects in American poetry whenever television is mentioned. Into her vortex Miller pours M-TV, drugs, "WalkMan (which will be a word / no one fifty years from now will know)," and this is done without condescension or any hoked-up romantic longing for a world before "technology." The sense of romance that does exist in *American Odalisque* is considerable indeed, but it is one busy within the documentary of what is.

Miller's antennae pick up idioms at a very high frequency, she switches the channels frequently, and the best of what's here establishes Miller squarely in the vanguard of those who are using language to such effect. This book could have been more severely edited, however, as many of the poems read as exercises, journal outtakes, and there are several poems which betray their surface by falling utterly flat in their closure ("The Mate to the Plum," "Destiny," and others). The strong poems are impossible to quote, allowing for the length that would give a sense to their drift and woof. I've been told it's impossible to admire two writers like Hudgins and Miller whose aesthetics are so disparate—but that's ridiculous. One can love a windmill but still relish a cheeseburger in a hot convertible, and while Hudgins honors something very old at the center of things Miller is out there working the guy wires at their breaking point.

Rose,[4] a first book by Li-Young Lee, is also a book obsessed with family and the realities of emigration, of being between two cultures and between tongues in a manner which makes memory simultaneous with the present and the passage of time. Lee's structure in *Rose* is not narrative, but a tale does emerge from the raw repetition by which Lee builds discrete poems and then melds, hurtles one into the one following it. Each poem and the entire book exist in and are held up to an endless instant I associate with the structure of a lyric, and it's more a sense of character (and all that character bespeaks of intelligence, wisdom, authority), rather than a story, that marks this book. Unlike Miller's book, this one is absolutely pared down, and a dramatic structure does emerge in *book form*.

There are many children of Rilke at the moment, many for whom his work is a presiding spirit, and Lee is one of those who honors Rilke's high lyricism best. Lee has appropriated the idiom of Romanticism but practices a tone all his own. With the clean, taut free verse line Lee most often employs, he has also fashioned rhetorical forms within that form which trade often on repetition and parallelism and their hypnotic advancing and returning powers.

> Not for the golden pears, rotten on the ground—
> their sweetness their secret—not for the scent
> of their dying did I go back to my father's house.

[4]ROSE, by *Li-Young Lee*. Boa Editions, Ltd. $12.95; $6.95.

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Not for the grass
grown wild as his beard in his last months,
nor for the hard, little apples that littered the yard,
and vines, rampant on the porch, tying the door shut,
did I stand there, late, rain arriving.
The rain came. And where there is rain
there is time, and memory, and sometimes sweetness.
Where there is a son there is a father.
And if there is love there is
no forgetting, but regret rending
two shaggy hearts.

The way Lee gathers a poem and the syntactical twists he often employs (as with "rain arriving") are akin to the best weaves spun by a poet like Michael Burkard. Like Baca, Lee manages to take very personal materials and rend them into individuated yet generalized, even mythic themes. Lee's characters of mother and father in these poems are defined and known by details of their histories and relations, but everywhere we feel pressing down upon us the force of *mother*, *father*, in their originating and motivating incarnations. The father, especially, is a rueful presence in *Rose*, an Oedipal titan there to be overcome, supplanted, forgiven possibly. But he is also, as Gerald Stern points out in his introduction, a godlike figure to be comprehended, withstood, while we fear and love him. As Stern also says, "The 'father' in contemporary poetry tends to be either a pathetic soul or a bungler or a sweet loser, overwhelmed by the demands of family and culture and workplace. At very best he is a small hero who died early or escaped west or found the bottle and whom the poet, in his or her poem, is forgiving." Lee's meditations upon the father, the father who is both inspiring and spanking, are rueful in their own right, rueful so that we can see the father within the son, the poker within the fire, the myth as it moves from soul to soul. Lee chronicles this passage with a tenderness and empathy which always threaten to fall into bathos but seldom do. I would quarrel, on occasion, with Lee's use of the word *human*. Like Stern when Stern lapses, Lee uses the term as if it signified all that is sweet, tender, oh-so-warm, when in fact as a synonym for *Homo sapiens* it often means just the opposite. Let's face it—if the term is to maintain any meaning at all we must also admit that Hitler and his cronies were "deeply human," and where we mean *humane* let's get the record straight. Otherwise this book is signed by its considerable authority over any number of words as they cover and recover each other in what reads like one long poem. The book has both the ambition and audacity we'd expect in a Hart Crane, simmered down into the Rilkean lyric.

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MICHAEL GORRA

American Selves

"YOU ARE NOT THE KIND OF GUY who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning." So Jay McInerney at the start of *Bright Lights, Big City*, which despite all the hoopla about brat pack novelists and major motion pictures still seems to me one of the funniest and most penetrating first novels of the eighties. Penetrating because that first sentence suggests a crucial shift in the perception of the American self—suggests that the novel's nameless second-person narrator isn't free to make the terms on which he'll engage the world, but can only respond to it as the "kind of guy" he already is. Late in the novel he finds himself "Toward dawn . . . riding around in a limo with a guy named Bernie." Bernie is a Jewish cocaine dealer who thinks of his limo as his office. "You got an office like this?" he asks. "Of course you don't. You got Ivy League written all over you. But I could buy you and your old man and his country club . . ." Bernie has the freedom to create a self, like Bellow's Augie March going at the world in his own free-style Chicago way. McInerney's narrator doesn't. His character is too rooted in American society, the "kind of guy" he is too determined by education, class, and ethnicity for him to light out for the territories as Bernie has.

My point is that the drug dealer seems a lot closer than the narrator to the classic characters of American literature—not only Augie but also Isabel Archer, or Gatsby and his platonic conception of himself. Such characters could aspire to create the terms on which they engaged America because the country itself was still so fluid, so caught up in the process of inventing its own identity, that the identity of the individual human subject didn't yet seem determined from outside. But that was a long time ago. Earl Rovit wrote in a 1960 essay on Ralph Ellison that the only characters—and by extension, the only novelists—who had since World War II been able to mount that characteristic "search for identity" came from outside the New England WASP great tradition. Certainly the boldest attempts on that theme in recent years have been by writers outside that tradition—I think of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, or Philip Roth's sense of identity as a set of masks improvised for particular occasions in *The Counterlife*. But American society as a whole has grown too thick, too knotted, to sustain that search, and McInerney's tacit admission of its impossibility, at the very start of the novel, strikes me as a new direction in American fiction.

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Most American writers aren't as comfortable with such limits as he is, however, and I wonder about the consequences of that classic theme's growing unavailability. What happens when it's no longer possible to conceive of being an American as an act of continuous invention? For one can't simply reject that conception of America; one still has that characteristic American anxiety about identity, but an anxiety newly complicated by an inability to define what being an American means for one's self. I think that leads to a sense of literary defeat (analogous, perhaps, to the growing awareness of the United States as a nation in decline), whose mark is the minimalism so characteristic of most younger American writers. That minimalism is most obvious in formal terms: in the affectless prose of many American short-story writers, and even in the vogue for the short story itself, a more manageable form in an era of diminished expectations. But that style often overlays an emotional anorexia that I see even in stylistically innovative writers like McInerney—a lack of energy, an inability to commit one's self to anything beyond the next drink, to step beyond a self that must remain isolated and inviolable because it feels so very fragile. And I would guess that this sense of defeat even lies behind the frequency with which contemporary writers refer to brand names. They carry the hope that the self can be defined through its tastes—that by choosing this brand of jeans, that brand of ice cream, a person can cobble together a self, or at least that reasonable facsimile of the self called a "lifestyle," and so avoid the challenge of having to construct one in the old sense.

Let the above stand as a lens through which to look at some recent American fiction. The book of the season is clearly Tom Wolfe's fat and funny *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, which both confirms and belies much of what I've said above.[1] There has never been anything minimalist about Wolfe. His first novel is ambitious in its social range and sweep, in the knowingness with which it describes the various worlds of New York City, in its stylistic flamboyance. And his assumptions are markedly different from those of most American fiction, contemporary or not. Nobody here can define the terms on which the self will engage society. Everybody is hemmed in by institutions of one sort or another, and above all by ethnicity, with which Wolfe's characters seem as obsessed as most urbanites actually are. Here Larry Kramer, an assistant district attorney in the Bronx, muses on a group gathered to discuss a case:

> There were two Irishmen in the room, Martin and Fitzgibbon, and two Jews, Goldberg and himself, but to all intents and pur-

[1]THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES, by *Tom Wolfe*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $19.95.

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> poses there were four Irishmen. I'm still Jewish, thought Kramer, but not in this room. All the cops turned Irish, the Jewish cops, like Goldberg, but also the Italian cops, the Latin cops, and the black cops. The black cops even; nobody understood the police commissioners, who were usually black, because their skin hid the fact that they had turned Irish.

Which in the end only underlines how un-Irish Kramer actually is. Wolfe has the same Balzacian ambition here as in his nonfiction, to provide a taxonomy of American society that shows how the self is defined by the things around it, by money, class, education, the exigencies of fashion. Everybody knows by now that the novel tells how Sherman McCoy, the million-dollar-a-year Park Avenue WASP bond broker, becomes the "Great White Defendant" of the Bronx, charged with a hit-and-run accident he didn't commit. What's surprising is how little most of the novel has to do with that. Each chapter may set some plot element in motion, but Sherman's story serves mostly to stitch together a series of set pieces, extremely excerptible and so great fun to read aloud, about things like working on a tabloid newspaper, or in an investment bank, or in the district attorney's office. About how landlords of rent-controlled buildings bug their tenants' apartments to see if they're illegally subleasing; or the way maitre d's at fashionable restaurants get rid of customers who die at table; or why one Rikers Island inmate must be a particularly hard case—even in prison he comes up with two new pairs of Reeboks a week. Very little of it is essential, but all of it seems so fascinating that though you know Wolfe is digressing, you don't mind.

Much of this material is not that different from the early sketches about New York, like "The Girl of the Year," that Wolfe turned out in the mid-sixties. And his technique is the same—he's a ventriloquist, inhabits the minds and voices of his characters, seeing through and exposing them to us. We learn most of what we need to know about Sherman from the fact that his Wall Street success makes him think of himself as a "Master of the Universe," the name of a "set of lurid, rapacious plastic dolls that his otherwise perfect daughter liked to play with . . . unusually vulgar, even for plastic toys." The ventriloquism is so successful, in fact, that it makes all Wolfe's characters contemptible. It's hard to summon any sympathy for them, so well do we know them, so hard have we laughed at them; too easy to feel superior to them, particularly if you're lucky enough not to live in New York. But I won't remember *The Bonfire of the Vanities* for its emotional coldness. Nor will I remember it for any sort of coherent moral stance, even though some reviews have located a deeply conservative vision in it. No—what I'll remember is its extraordinary verbal and comic energy, the mad storms of laughter it provoked. *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, like *Decline and Fall*

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or *Lucky Jim*, is the sort of book that makes its readers smile in delighted anticipation of reading it all again.

Emily Prager's first novel,[2] like *Bright Lights, Big City*, is one of those coolly-packaged Vintage Contemporaries Originals, the literary novel as an up-market brand name, the Ben and Jerry's of the book trade. But this flavor isn't as successful. *Clea and Zeus Divorce* might be described as a music video in the form of a novel. The title characters have made a career out of enacting scenes from their life in a series of television specials. So there's no Clea or Zeus, properly speaking, but only "Clea" or "Zeus," only the role and not an actualized self, as Clea realizes in thinking that "Her performing emotion was useless in a human context." Nor can she summon the emotions appropriate for that context, because they've taken "poetic license with their life, theatricalizing it, decorating the tedious parts . . . they couldn't quite distinguish what happened from what they had designed." They perform a self as an alternative to having one. Now they've decided to announce their divorce by doing another show, which opens with them on-stage, sharing out their possessions, recalling scenes from their lives together. And the novel itself cuts between an account of the show and one of their earlier life—how they met, their childhoods, and above all Clea's conviction that Kennedy Airport is going to get nuked about two-thirds of the way through the performance.

But the ideas Prager plays with about theatricality and the self are more interesting abstracted from the novel than in the work itself. "When Clea returned from the awards taping, it was eight P.M., prime—as the TV people were wont to call it—time, like prime rib, juicy lean time not fatty, gristly time, not, as they called the period one A.M., the graveyard shift." The pun seems labored and the metaphor clumsily mixed, without the high Wildean frivolity and verbal inventiveness such mannered material needs. And I'm bothered by other things too. Zeus is an exiled white Rhodesian whose entourage includes some machine-gun-toting childhood friends called "The Seven Golden Lieutenants"; the Aryanism is camp, but only just. Though I suppose that's meant to be balanced by a sort of third world chic—there's an African medicine woman and a Chinese sage in the entourage as well. Like all those spots on MTV that flash a half-second image of a mushroom cloud or a riot across the screen, *Clea and Zeus Divorce* invokes a number of weighty issues, but is finally far less meaningful than it appears to be.

Elizabeth Tallent's second collection is more familiar material.[3] Her main subject is adultery and how, usually, to stay together in spite of it, maybe because of it. Tallent is very good at describing

[2]CLEA AND ZEUS DIVORCE, by *Emily Prager*. Random House: A Vintage Contemporaries Original. $6.95p.

[3]TIME WITH CHILDREN, by *Elizabeth Tallent*. Alfred A. Knopf. $15.95.

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the processes of domesticity—cooking, fixing the house up, the tacit decisions about the rules of a marriage. "Grant of Easement," set like much of her work in New Mexico, describes Jenny and Sam's relations with old man Sandoval, who's sold Sam some eggs and cheated him, giving him only ten instead of a dozen. Jennie and Sam need Sandoval to grant an easement before they can close on their house, and they have to figure out what to do. Confront him about the missing eggs? Let it go, and risk his contempt? Count them each time? Not buy from him again? Tallent deals nicely with the small decisions that measure out daily life, and at the end of the story, the easement granted, Sandoval hands Jennie the two missing eggs.

But why should it end there? For their debate about the eggs has been a way of talking in code about their marriage—her adultery, his decision to buy this isolated house—and none of those issues have been resolved. Page by page "Grant of Easement" is very successful, but the whole of the story seems less than the sum of its parts. So it is with each of the stories in *Time With Children*—and yet the collection is, paradoxically, more than the sum of its individual stories. Tallent includes two more stories about Sam and Jennie, and the same territory is gone over, our sense of them deepened. There are four stories, including the title piece, about Charlie and Kyra, New Yorkers living in London "to leave behind someone Charlie was beginning to be interested in." Then two stories about the middle-aged academic Hart, and his young second wife Caro, who can't forget that she was once the other woman. And the echoes within and between each group make the book as a whole a fascinating set of variations on the idea of fidelity in marriage.

Nothing like the creation of a self is at stake here. Life seems instead a process of learning to live with the "kind of guy" one already is, with decisions already made. And Tallent's work seems the literary equivalent of this season's hot new "lifestyle," what the newspapers call "cocooning," in which people stay at home, watch TV, and conserve their energy. I don't mean that's all these characters do—just that the world of domesticity is the only one these stories know. There's no public dimension to them, no attempt to make a connection between these characters and the national life, and that makes me finally ambivalent about the book, marked by a careful charting of emotional nuance, but lacking so much of what I want fiction to offer.

Her prose seems to me the generic American prose of the eighties:

> Nicholas made a soft hissing, tongue to his front teeth: a child's embarrassment at being asked a question so far off the mark, so devoid of any intuition about the child's situation, that he is forced—briefly but with urgency—to wonder at the poverty of

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> comprehension, which seems to imply that he is not at the heart of his father's world. Nicholas would have forgotten it completely in a minute, Kyra knew, but she didn't like it that he had had to feel it. She imagined that her eyes were firing tiny red darts into Charlie's big, dense back.

Now try this:

> In the small, bright room Michael's animals stand on all the window sills, on his desk, and over his head on a long shelf. There are wooden turtles, spiders, dinosaurs, even a cat or two, but mostly it's snakes, some curling, some coiled, some, improbably, standing straight up in the air. They are cut from many different woods, more shades of brown than I knew existed. Michael is on the telephone, talking about money.

The first passage is by Tallent, the second by Steve Barthelme, younger brother of Frederick and Donald. There are obvious differences between them—tense, first vs. third person, the fact that one describes objects and the other emotions—but not in the quality of the voice. Both pieces of prose are precise, simple, transparently bare; the words are short, without much sense of verbal play. Neither voice calls attention to itself, but tries to cut directly through to whatever it attempts to depict. Either could have been written by any number of young American writers.

The title of Barthelme's first collection[4] comes from Chekhov's "The Lament," in which a poor cabman tries to tell his customers about the death of his son. But they won't listen, and so he tells his "little horse the whole story," instead. The aesthetic that title points to is much in vogue now, but Barthelme's choice of it seems both self-congratulatory and inaccurate. When a woman in "That's No Reason" strips down to her "leopard-skin panties" and her new lover laughs, Barthelme writes "that almost put an end to their relationship right there, but getting insulted must have seemed like too much effort . . ." Too much effort. Barthelme tells most of these stories in the first-person voice of a man of around thirty. It's not the same man from story to story, by which I mean the names have changed. He has a good job that he's not particularly interested in, and there's a girlfriend or a wife, and an ex-, either of his or of hers. None of these characters seem particularly happy with their lives, but they lack the energy, not only to change their circumstances, but even to feel any Chekhovian despair over their inability to do so. It almost seems they'd be better off, and the stories themselves stronger, if their lives were bleaker.

[4]AND HE TELLS THE LITTLE HORSE THE WHOLE STORY, by *Steve Barthelme*. Johns Hopkins University Press. $14.95.

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Steve Barthelme moves his characters around efficiently and has a sharp eye for detail. But he doesn't yet have a strongly individual voice. The PEN-Faulkner Award winner John Edgar Wideman does have that individual voice, or rather voices. For one of the attractions of *Reuben*[5] is the ease with which he moves between the minds of his characters, now inhabiting the title character, a self-taught lawyer in the black Pittsburgh neighborhood of Homewood; now one or another of Reuben's clients, like the college basketball recruiter Wally, or Kwansa Parker, whose old lover Waddell has stolen their child away; now the choral voice of barroom spectator recalling the novel's concluding fight between Kwansa and Waddell:

> Sheeit. Don't tell me. I was there. Them bitches kicked his ass. First one got him in the eyes and he's hollering, don't know what hit him. He's rolling on the floor and screaming and punching the shit out the bitch but she steady raking his face with them fingernails. Yeah, man. Like razors. Could see em drawing blood. Nobody don't try to stop it, neither. Shit. Who wants to get down in that mess? Howling and thumping and biting and scratching. She's like a pack of alley cats on that poor boy's head. Nobody don't want nothing to do wit it. Not even when he finally got up on top her. Got the best of her, you know. Him being a man, you dig. But boy, she give him a go for a while. A hefty mama. You know Kwansa Parker, man. Nothing skinny bout that ho.

Wideman's pungent mastery of Black English is one of the novel's givens. So I note instead the difference between "sheeit" and "shit," the nonchalance of "Got the best of her, you know," the economy with which such phrases evoke a speaker at once unillusioned and yet surprised by what he sees. What's most surprising about this voice, however, is that Wideman hasn't used it until the end of the novel. In the sentence before this passage starts, he's been writing as an objective third-person narrator; on the previous page he's sunk his own voice into Kwansa's memory of the one time Waddell took her to a restaurant, with "a waiter dishing out food from his tray like they ain't got the sense to help themselves." Now he jump-cuts into the voice of Homewood itself, without preparation and yet without losing me, and in reading I'm dazzled by the speed and the daring and the skill.

But that's not the only way Wideman's narrative moves around. A third of the way through the novel he offers a present-tense account of Reuben's days as a janitor at the University of Pennsylvania, where his duties include taking the frat boys to a whorehouse in the black part of town. But it's only near the chapter's end that Wideman lets us realize this account is half reverie and half Reu-

[5]REUBEN, by *John Edgar Wideman*. Henry Holt. $16.95.

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ben's side of a conversation with Wally, an explanation of the rage he feels toward white America. Wally shares that rage, and his description might have come from of *Notes of a Native Son*. "You live among them, thrive, love one or two, but . . . it's in your gut and there's righteous cause for it to be there, so it stays there . . . Trouble is the hate's bad for you." But he can't forget the isolation and anger he felt his first year in college on a basketball scholarship, and it may or may not have led him to kill a white man in a Chicago men's room. May or may not because the boundary here between the fantasies of the inner life and the outer world, or between one moment and another, is as permeable as in Faulkner. Faulkner is, in fact, clearly on Wideman's mind, both in his interfusion of past and present, and in the way he returns to Homewood in book after book. (This is the fourth he's set there.) Wally remembers reading "A Rose for Emily" in college, and Reuben is fascinated by Eadweard Muybridge, the nineteenth-century pioneer of stop-action photography. Wideman's use of Muybridge seems less economical and more labored than Faulkner's use of Quentin Compson's watch, but both yield a sense of the past as being at once irrevocably over and yet present as well. This is particularly true for Kwansa, who lives in memory of the time just before Waddell got her pregnant.

The various pieces of the novel don't fully cohere; Wideman never pulls the stories of his three main characters—Kwansa, Wally, and Reuben—into a whole. But page by page this is the most exciting new fiction I read this quarter, marked by an energy and a passion that makes its story of poverty, violence, and prostitution anything but depressing. Reuben starts life as a janitor, but by the time the novel begins has for years worked as a lawyer, though a member of no bar, a man known in Homewood as someone who "would take your troubles downtown. Peace bond, bail bond, divorce, drunk and disorderly . . ." He has created the terms on which he engages American life. But he gets caught in the end, arrested, exposed as a mere "do-gooder," and not a lawyer at all. Gatsby couldn't reach the green light; the territories caught up with Huck. *Reuben* joins them in demonstrating how impossible the dream of a fresh new world, if not the literature that depends on it, has always been.

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DICK ALLEN

A Longing to Breathe Free

I WAS RAISED IN A RURAL UPSTATE NEW YORK VILLAGE surrounded by small farms, their windmills, cornfields, gingham-curtained farmhouses and dank outbuildings lying to the sides of meandering dirt roads. My great-grandfather had been a farmer, my great Uncle Earl was still one. Many of my grade school and high school classmates came from these farms. Immediately after school let out, each day they went back to work on them while we village kids crowded the drugstore booths, playing the jukebox and shooting soda straws across initial-scarred tables. In our rural county we had what Wendell Berry, in his new collection of fourteen essays,[1] praises as "community": neighborliness, church pancake suppers, a feeling of place, of rootedness, of independence. None of our families was rich or even well-off, but we seemed—at least from my childhood perspective—to live relatively without want.

Berry, writing from the farmland of Kentucky, values this sort of life—much as I still do. He believes we can have it back. But as I read and reread his essays, I keep thinking of those farmboys and girls who looked so exhausted morning to night, their downcast eyes as they refused our after-school and weekend invitations. And when I return to this area I'll always call home, I find housing developments where the farmlands were, or abandoned buildings in untended fields. My farm family classmates now work in the new shopping malls, or have gone into real estate, or have moved many states away, escaping the drudgery their slumped shoulders and tired eyes spoke so continually about. The phrase from the old song puts it succinctly: "How ya gonna keep them down on the farm, after they've seen Parree?"

In plain-spoken, more popular than profound essays first appearing in such magazines as *Country Journal*, *Whole Earth Review* and *Draft Horse Journal* as well as *TriQuarterly* and the *L.A. Times*, Berry gives us a somewhat ill-fitting amalgamation of pro- and anti-capitalist views. He argues "that what passes now for economics, like what passes now for natural defense, has strayed far from any idea of home, either the world or the world's ecosystems and human households." The essays seek to address the imbalance, but in so doing Berry slights psychological realities. Mainly economic conditions, he feels, have caused the family farms to go under.

[1] HOME ECONOMICS, by *Wendell Berry*. North Point Press. $20.00; $9.95.

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Obviously, I disagree. Reading Berry, one notes he has miraculously whisked out of existence television, airplanes, computers, and a gigantic array of other technologically-induced elements of the modern world not about to melt into airy dreams. Likewise, he has not convincingly taken into account how modern technology has increasingly made not only the states of the Union interdependent, but nations—great and small—also interdependent. In a process that seems irreversible culturally and economically, the global village continues to form. Self-sufficient communities are broken into and broken down, colonized or absorbed. Because Berry's essays are mostly arguments for the undespoiled maintenance of such communities, they are arguments for a dying cause.

This is hardly to dismiss them. Rather, in holding up an alternative to the economics currently destroying world ecology, the essays remind us that what we have lost and are continuing to lose are traditional spiritual values without which life has little purpose outside of aspirations to bloat with greed and leisure. Home is what Americans, even in the cities, have at least pretended to value—the foundation for Jeffersonian democracy. Since we have been notably unsuccessful in finding a substitute basis for values, since so many of those values we pretend to retain are predicated upon the assumption or desire for well-cared-for land's continual existence, we should not *unthinkingly* loosen our grip on what is slipping from us.

Berry conceives of his "essays as trials." He writes, "The subject of the argument is the fact, and ultimately the faith, that things connect—that we are wholly dependent on a pattern, an all-inclusive form, that we partly understand." He says "we are up against mystery" and "To call the unknown by its right name, 'mystery,' is to suggest that we had better respect the possibility of a larger, unseen pattern that can be damaged or destroyed and, with it, the smaller patterns." We live, he feels, in the Kingdom of God. So as not to put off secularists, he calls it "The Great Economy." There is an order to our Great Economy, but "this order is both greater and more intricate than we can know."

Modern humans, the makers of the industrial economy, have ignored the mystery. "Somewhere between, say, Pope's verses on the Chain of Being in *An Essay on Man* and Blake's 'London,' the dominant minds had begun to see the human race, not as a part or member of Creation, but as outside it and opposed to it."

Runaway capitalism of the most vicious sort, not tempered by the ideal of " 'the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption,' which both defines and requires neighborly love" has given us a terrible sense of values:

> When we make our economy a little wheel turning in opposition to what we call "nature," then we set up competitiveness as the ruling principle in our explanation of reality and in our understanding of economy; we make of it, willy-nilly, a virtue. But com-

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petitiveness, as a ruling principle and a virtue, imposes a logic that is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to control. That logic explains why our cars and our clothes are shoddily made, why our "wastes" are toxic, and why our "defensive" weapons are suicidal; it explains why it is so difficult for us to draw a line between "free enterprise" and crime. If our economic ideal is maximum profit with minimum responsibility, why should we be surprised to find our corporations so frequently in court and robbery on the increase? Why should we be surprised to find that medicine has become an exploitive industry, profitable in direct proportion to its hurry and its mechanical indifference? People who pay for shoddy products or careless services and people who are robbed outright are equally victims of theft, the only difference being that the robbers outright are not guilty of fraud.

Additionally, in essay after essay Berry plays variations on the "small is beautiful" theme. He says "Our choice may be between a small, human-sized meaning and a vast meaninglessness, or between the freedom of our virtues and the freedom of our vices. It is only in these bonds that our individuality has a use and a worth; it is only to the people who know us, love us, and depend on us that we are indispensable as the persons we uniquely are." In "Men and Women in Search of Common Ground," he explicitly identifies "our true estate and identity: marriage, family, household, friendship, neighborhood, community."

Old fashioned, yes. Romantic, yes. Luddite to quite a degree. We are to admire the values of the Amish, to keep the scale down, for "the pleasantness or unpleasantness of farm work depends upon scale." Our homeland must not be regarded as a resource, but as something to be prized for what it is. Community has "a value . . . that *counts* in [a] practical or powerful way." But "the wonderful fact . . . is that those emotional and spiritual values that are now so inconsequentially associated with the idea of community were economic assets in the old communities, and they produced economic results." In the essay "A Good Farmer of the Old School" we are treated to a portrait of a farmer who makes the small farm provide a decent living by dint of hard work and use of such things as natural fertilizer. In another essay we find we would do well to emulate those who "choose one another and their place, over the rewards offered them by outside investors."

Similar thoughts and feelings provide Berry with the basis for the strongest essay in his collection, "Property, Patriotism, and National Defense." Some of its ideas have originally been explored in much greater detail by Jonathan Schell, but Berry's reasoning has the virtue of compression:

That a nation should purchase at an exorbitant price and then rely upon a form of defense inescapably fatal to itself is, of

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course, absurd; that good citizenship should be defined as willing acceptance of such a form of defense can only be ruinous of the political health of that nation. To ask intelligent citizens to believe an argument that in its essentials is not arguable and to approve results that are not imaginably good (and in the strict sense are not imaginable at all) is to drive wedges of disbelief and dislike between those citizens and their government.

What Berry adds to the illumination of our modern defense system's absurdity when "what we are proposing to ourselves and to the world is that we are prepared to die, to the last child, to the last green leaf, in defense of our dearest principles of liberty, charity and justice," is his pointing out that a people truly believing in such principles would be expected to live "lives of great austerity, sacrifice, and selfless discipline." We aren't, of course. It's all "whitewash." If we truly believed, we would "forbid all taking of profit from military industries." Those who made or allowed war should "be the first into battle" and we would "require *all* the able-bodied to serve," all who are "able to walk and work" except the young who would be allowed some portion of their early lives free of such demands. Berry finds great hypocrisy in those who profess they would defend a land they, themselves, are destroying, a land uncared for by the bulk of the population. How can we be willing to defend a land we expressly do not care for, nor cherish? Both the philosophy and economics of a sound national defense must be based on the values of home responsibility.

In "Higher Education and Home Defense" Berry scorns those who do not live on the land, in the communities their industrial projects are ruining. "In order to be able to desecrate, endanger, or destroy a *place*, after all, one must be able to leave it and to forget it. One must never think of any place as one's home. One must never think of any place as anyone else's home. One must believe that no place is as valuable as what it might be changed into or as what might be taken out of it." Servants of "the *general* public . . . might be enemies at any time to any particular segment of the general public." We could add to this a pointing out of the bankruptcy of values which allows companies to set up headquarters in a community, transform that community, then ten or fifteen years later pull up stakes, expecting employees to follow, retire, or go on unemployment . . . and the enterprises that depended on that company's presence to go out of existence. When the maximum profit for the corporation takes precedent over the well-being of all but a few of its employees—or its distant stockholders—what in God's name have we been working to achieve?

Perhaps we might change our values through strong university education? In "The Loss of the University," Berry doubts this. In the modern university, too, we find the "loss of concern for the thing made . . . the loss of agreement on what the thing is that is

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being made." That thing should be "a fully developed . . . human being." Values are not presently taught. In literature "the *texts* are tracked as by the passing of an army of ants, but the power of songs and stories to affect life is still little acknowledged, apparently because it is little felt." The business of education is "how to make and how to judge" and "to prepare young people for life is to prepare them to know the difference between good and evil" for "a university must be interested in the question of the truth of what it teaches . . . for the sake of the world's health, it must be interested in the fate of that truth and the uses made of it in the world."

All these ideas, feelings, sentiments are thoroughly interesting and when I read, say, "An Irish Journal," I find myself also charmed by "the little farmyard" with "its buildings . . . kept up. It was small and abundant, modest and excellent." Perhaps it is the disappearance of the *option* of such life, however, that we must most mourn.

If such an option is truly to be a possible one, essayists like Berry must take their arguments to the extremes most avoid. That is, there is little or no chance of young men and women—before them the pleasures of materialism and leisure and the afterwork drug of mass entertainment—being willing to live lives of hand work for a decent but not exorbitant standard of living unless they and their nation undergo a vast spiritual conversion.

At present, there is little likelihood of such a conversion taking place in this secularized, industrialized, computerized, pluralistic world. Although we caught a glimpse of what some feel were its possible beginnings in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with chants of love and brotherhood and sisterhood and communes, how unmiraculously the flower children turned Yuppies and *Hair* turned to *Rambo*. The forces of change, of history, of Future Shock batter down the voices from the farm, leaving but small pockets and eddies.

It is true that writers like Berry articulate our distress, just as in spending a few days in Amish country or admiring the Shaker barns and furniture we instinctively know that we are living wrong. Our ozone layer is being depleted, our top soil is vanishing, our educational system is irresponsible, our national defense policy is crazy. On the faces of men and women everywhere are the expressions of resigned despair, or bewildered hope, or bored apathy. Goals and values are lost in the great split of humanity from living in a harmony with Nature—when humanity's satisfactions might come from its limited and thus truest place-centered relationships. And, as we read recent reports from the Soviet Union and Red China, we are continually reminded of how these nations are rediscovering that their small and individually owned farms provide their major source of food, and we may worriedly shake our heads as we find our own home-based private ownership economy weakening so rapidly.

Only an almost irresistible and widely-adopted philosophy or the-

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ology able to convince us, body and soul, that human meaning and worth are to be found in "the smaller economy" might truly change our ways. Such a belief system would have to convince us that unless we find harmonies and respect the mysteries we are *truly evil* and we and our children shall suffer the consequences of *evil* in our present and after-lives. But our century has had too many plans, too many holocausts, cultural revolutions, killing fields, too much selfish patriotism for us to trust extensively in the teaching and promulgation of values. No matter how initially or seemingly well intended, we have too often witnessed values turn dogmatic and perverted. We need values; we have learned to distrust them. It is a terrible paradox.

My great-grandfather's farm passed from the family long ago, as did my Uncle Earl's. Now, as I drive the newly paved county roads of Saratoga and Corinth counties, through some of the small villages still there and past the few remaining farms, I, too, long to abandon many of my larger ambitions, my VCR and the stressful choices offered by my new suburban shopping mall, and walk in the fields behind a horse, raise my voice in praise at religious services, talk on summer porches, play cards in the evening with the boys, chop wood as the snowflakes whirl over land that was my ancestors' since Colonial days and may now be mine again.

I picture Wendell Berry doing something similar and I envy him. But like my school friends, I cannot hold back the world. It is a *compromise* I must seek within it—of good work, small house, community (yes, we must start with "a small, human-sized meaning"); but also we must have a willingness and assumed duty to monitor and shepherd, in what small ways we can, technology, industrialization, telecommunications, space exploration, medical and genetic research. As the brilliant poet-philosopher Frederick Turner has frequently pointed out, these elements of the modern world are also components of humankind's evolving web of relationships. When we accept or protest against their major roles in our daily lives (by voting, writing, legislating, carrying placards or actively refusing to participate in inhuman endeavors) we are consciously and realistically involved in the changing pattern of the world. We can't realistically retreat from what Robert Frost called "all this now too much for us" without undergoing a long period of world-wide depression and anarchy; if we believe in traditional values, we must seed them in a future consciously analyzed and at least loosely planned via attention to Future Studies such as those by The Club of Rome. Irreversible world conditions, the staggering growth in world population being only one, guarantee that our future as a nation and as individuals will be neither physically nor mentally isolationist.

What Berry finally misses stating clearly is that our local place is no longer Kentucky or upstate New York. Our local place is the planet itself and *everywhere* on it must be conceived of, cared for, and understood as home.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JAYANTA MAHAPATRA's most recent book is *Selected Poems*, published by Oxford University Press. Mr. Mahapatra writes that "Much of my time is spent under the bamboos in my dusty Cuttack home, feeling the sunlight, dreaming of something to hold back the unlikely works of man." . . . JAMES McCONKEY is the Goldwin Smith Professor of English Literature at Cornell, where he has taught since 1956. His essay in this issue will be part of the third volume of *Court of Memory*, a continuing autobiographical work. . . . PETER MAKUCK is the editor of *Tar River Poetry*, and in addition teaches in the English department at East Carolina University. His chapbook of poems, *Pilgrims*, was published by Ampersand Press in 1987. . . . RONALD DE FEO is a senior editor of *ARTnews* magazine. He is currently at work on a group of interrelated stories about the breakdown of personality and language. . . . MONROE K. SPEARS recently retired from Rice University. He is now Brown Foundation Fellow and Professor of English at the University of the South. . . . RICHMOND LATTIMORE wrote the "Last Five Poems" during the last year of his life, inspired by memories of his travels in England and Italy. Besides his translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and the New Testament and numerous Greek plays, he published five volumes of poetry. He died on February 26, 1984. . . . AVA LEAVELL HAYMON* is currently working in the Artists in the Schools program in Baton Rouge.

LAURENCE LIEBERMAN's poem in this issue will be included in his book *The Creole Mephistopheles*, due out from Scribners/Macmillan in January 1989. In 1987 he travelled extensively in the Caribbean on an NEA fellowship. . . . RICHARD MOORE's two most recent books of verse are *Empires* and *The Education of a Mouse*. . . . J. ALLYN ROSSER* is a teaching fellow at the University of Pennsylvania, where she is working toward her doctorate. This year she received a grant from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. . . . RICHARD HORNBY played the Grand Inquisitor in a recent New York production of Schiller's *Don Carlos*. . . . BERT CARDULLO's book *Indelible Images* was recently nominated for the Theatre Library Association Award . . . . JAY PARINI's third book of poetry, *Town Life*, was recently published by Henry Holt. . . . Last spring, HAROLD FROMM conducted a symposium on poetry—its responsibilities and its audience—for the Lannan Foundation in Los Angeles. . . . DENNIS SAMPSON's first book of poems, *The Double Genesis*, was published by Story Line Press in 1985. . . . LIAM RECTOR's book of poems, *The Sorrow of Architecture*, was published in 1984. . . . MICHAEL GORRA teaches in the English department at Smith. . . . DICK ALLEN's fourth poetry collection, *Flight and Pursuit*, was published by Louisiana State University Press in 1987.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

Once he [Montaigne] has firmly disclaimed the intention of citing himself (or anyone else) as model, heroic or inspirational, he can present himself as friend, social describer of the weaknesses of our common humanity. In comparison with, for example, Kierkegaard or Kafka, who make us dreadfully aware of our essential solitude and our terrible responsibility, he makes us feel that we are not alone and that our responsibilities are, thank God, limited. He can thus provide companionship for us in this process of self-definition and thereby console and encourage us. —Monroe K. Spears, "Montaigne Our Contemporary," p. 301.

I was behind enemy lines, and nervous. To make matters worse, the dumpster was empty, and every time something hit the bottom, a great hollow boom reverberated in all directions from the parking lot. I was sure the building facade would blaze with light any minute now. Just as I was lifting four wooden jelly kegs from the car trunk, a pair of headlights swung around the corner from the direction of the police headquarters.

Sweating, I froze and watched the beams, given solidity by the building fog, slide and lance throught the trees, then disappear into a glare that made me squint. The cruiser came on and stopped just a few feet away.

—Peter Makuck, "Junk Trade," p. 274.

As a veteran teacher of creative writing courses, one who has read many autobiographical accounts thinly disguised as fiction, I have come to know much about the hidden resentments and the open atagonisms between children and their parents. At graduation time, during the receptions my college holds for the graduates and their families, I have often been touched not only by the affinity in bone structure that connects a particular son with the father with whom he seems to have spent his adolescence battling, but by an almost uncanny resemblance in gesture—a shy or defiant way of brushing back the hair, say—and in the timbre and mannerisms of speech. —James McConkey, "Contextual Surprises," p. 257.

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